STRATEGY PLUS

Issue 1 October 1990 £1.95 Amiga, Atari ST and IBM PC

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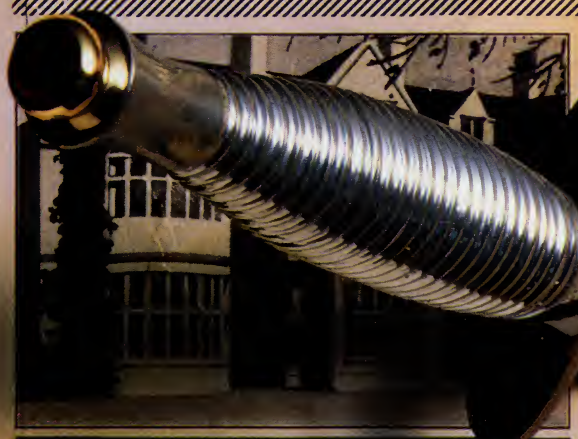
MURDER!

19TH JUNE 1941



'GHASTLEY MANOR' THE LOCATION OF HORRIFYING HOMICIDE

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It is believed Mr Innes was stabbed to death at the home of Mrs Audrey Broom-Hall, actress & widower of the famous film ...cer Sebastian Broom-Hall; who was holding a cocktail party for the rich & famous.

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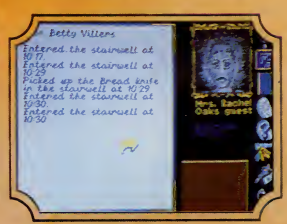

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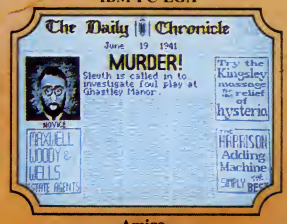
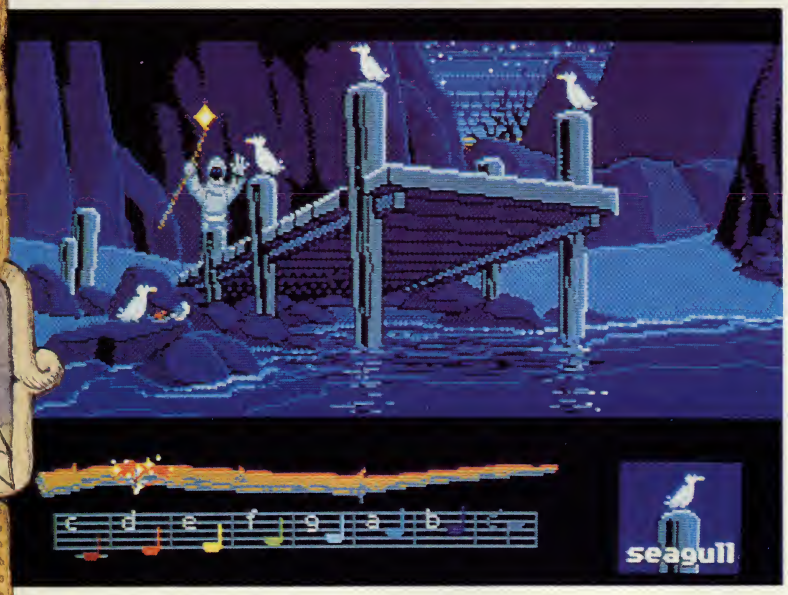


Amiga

LUCASFILM™ ON THE ART AND SCIENCE OF ENTERTAINMENT



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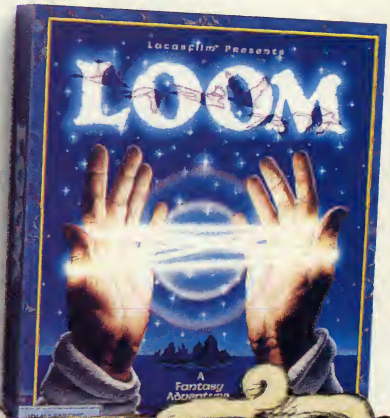

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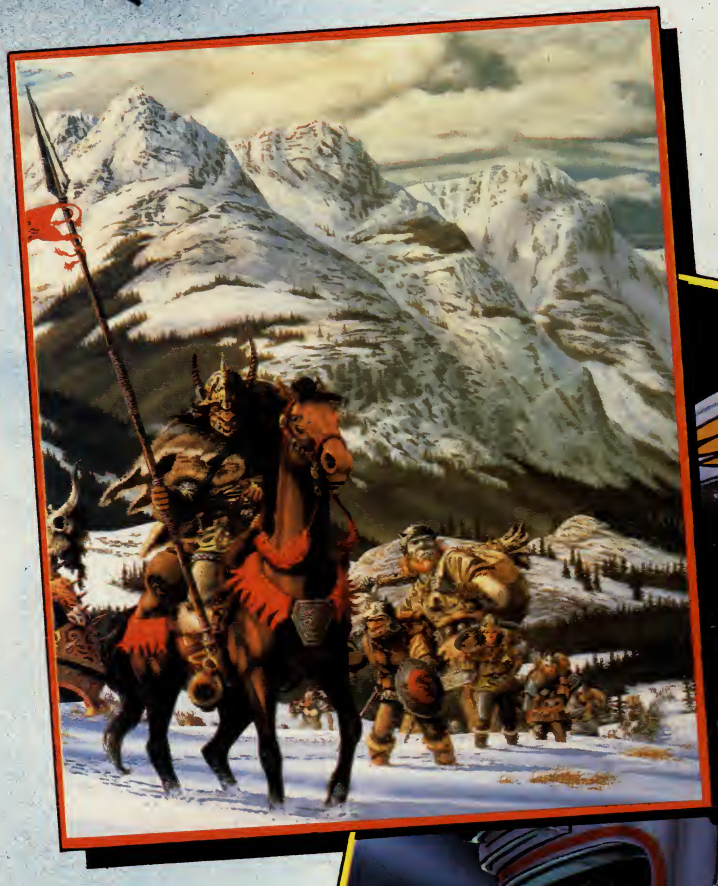

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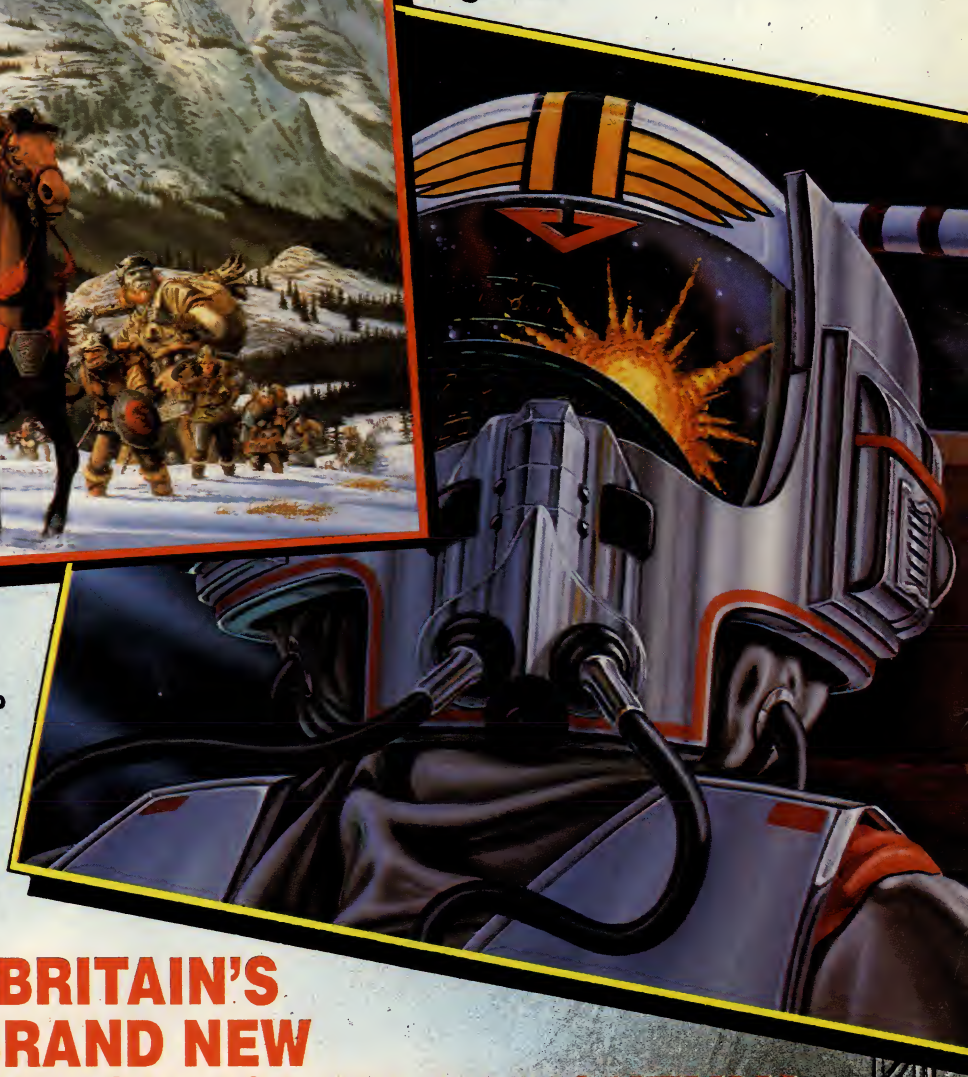

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Readers of *Games International* will probably be wondering what this latest piece of apparently unsolicited mail is doing on their doormat. The last issue of GI advised them that it would be replaced by a magazine called *Gamer*. For legal reasons it transpired that we could not use that title, hence the new moniker. *Strategy Plus* will be focusing on the more cerebral computer games. Despite the vast number of titles on the market we will be the only computer magazine concentrating on this area. We will still cover board games, the extent of this coverage being determined by the number of new releases.

Observant readers may note the absent of ratings. In part this was to distinguish us from the pack where the % is king, though it was also in recognition of the absurdity of this system and all the accompanying mumbo jumbo that attempts to justify it (can anyone explain the difference between say, 81% and 89%? Don't say 8%). We'd like readers to actually *read* the reviews, rather than just scan through a series of digits. All of which leads us neatly in to the nature of the reviews themselves...

WYRIWYG

What you read is what you get. Or is it?

The closest the software industry gets to a debate has been taking place quite recently in a trade paper. Normally such confabulations are of as much interest to the consumer as a seminar on grain farming in the Urals. However, in this instance it concerned both the nature and integrity of reviews. As reviews are often used as a basis for purchase it can be seen that this is an issue which should be close to the punter's pocket, if not his heart. The catalyst for all this soul searching was an unholy row earlier in the year between *Ace* magazine and Activision. The latter were furious over a less than flattering review of **Ghostbusters II** that appeared in *Ace*. Such was Activision's ire that apparently they turned up at EMAP's (the publisher of *Ace)* offices with m'learned friends in tow. According to industry sources a 'settlement' was reached later in the year, though in the interim Activision cancelled all advertising in EMAP publications.

Clearly it is hard to imagine such a scenario occurring in other industries such as the film or music business. Why, then, should it happen here? Why, for example, did not EMAP (one of the biggest publishers in the UK) tell Activision to ride out on the horse they rode in on? EMAP's case was not helped by the fact that the review in *Ace* was poorly written, factually inaccurate, and penned pseudonymously (though this is quite common and should not be regarded with suspicion). Nevertheless the only retribution to be exacted in this situation should have been a right of reply. So why did Activision go over the top? After all, poorly written computer game reviews are nothing new. There appear to be two answers to this question.

The first answer is licensing. The licensing rights to popular films such as *Batman* and *Robocop* don't come cheap. Clearly, then, to make a profit lots of units have to be shifted. Good reviews, or at least not bad reviews, are essential in this process. What seems to have happened in this instance is that *Ace* did not play the game (pun intended). **Ghostbusters II** was an expensive licence that could not be *allowed* to get a bad review. Can you imagine Activision storming the EMAP citadel over a poor review, of say, **Tusker**? All in all it was an incident from which neither party emerged with any credit and one which did nothing to dispel the suspicion of a heavy 'sleaze factor' in the link between advertising and editorial in computer game mags.

The second answer to our initial question lies in the software industry's perception of the function of the press. In a world awash with marketing jargon and PR speak, attempts at news management are inevitable. However, even the most hardened hacks in the Street of Shame would have been shocked by some of the responses to a poll of software houses, conducted by the trade paper *CTW*, on the fairness of games reviews. There seemed to be a consensus that the computer press was 'part of the (software) industry' and that we should not rock the boat. 'We are all in the business to make money so why print bad reviews?' opined one respondent. Another thought that the press should only print 'good reviews'. In fairness there were some that recognised the obvious, namely that the first obligation of a magazine is to its readers.

Pearls Before Swine

Quite apart from the morality involved it is also short sighted in the extreme to expect the press simply to be a sycophantic mouthpiece. When a company puts out inferior or bug ridden products the industry as a whole suffers, the innocent along with the guilty. It is up to the press to encourage the pursuit of excellence. Part of this process is (subjectively) identifying the swine among pearls so that the latter may flourish. The crux of the matter is not bad reviews or good reviews, but *honest* reviews. As to the policy of this magazine; having already climbed to the top of our ivory tower we now find we have nowhere else to go. What you read is what you get? Stay with us and find out. SP

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THE GLOBAL DILEMMA:

GUNS OR BUTTER

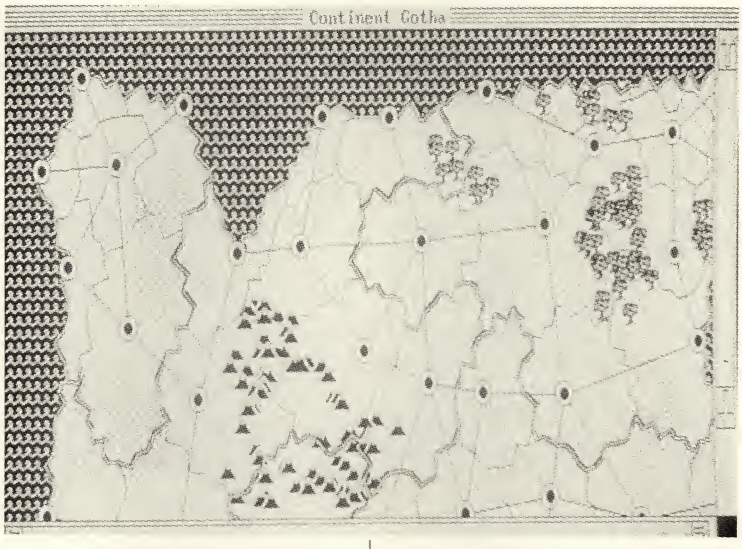
by John Harrington

THERE does not seem to be much of a 'global dilemma' about this game, where the aim is a rather old-fashioned one, that of conquering the world. It is a resource management wargame with the emphasis on the building of an economy to support your empire's mighty war machine.

As with **Balance of Power**, a previous offering from Chris Crawford, the game employs the programmed learning approach in the form of a beginner's level, an intermediate level and an expert level. At the beginner's level there is just you and one computer opponent, while at the higher levels there are more computer opponents and a more complex economic and political situation.

You play on one of two billion possible randomly generated worlds. Each world consists of one continent and several provinces. The provinces are usually interconnected by roads, which makes life easier for invading armies. In the intermediate and expert levels the terrain features have a bearing on how resource-rich a province might be, but do not affect combat.

The game is played in the following phases: Production, Military orders, Military execution, and Economic union (expert level only).



Production

At the heart of the game lies an econometric model which enables the player to determine the components of his Gross national Product by assigning workers to various parts of the production process. Increase the workforce engaged in, for instance, the manufacture of gunpowder and you will have to borrow workers from some other industry (the borrowing is done automatically by the program according to some complicated algorithm). This will most likely have knock-on effects throughout the economy and there is a lot of fine tuning involved before you achieve the right balance. The whole process entails a lot of fiddling about, adjusting variables, but the interface is user friendly, save for the need to use mouse clicks to input numbers when keyboard entry would have been so much swifter and easier.

It is in the production phase that the dilemma of choosing between guns and butter comes into play. Producing lots of food creates a food surplus, which in turn encourages a population boom on the next game turn. With an increased population comes an enlarged workforce and an expanded economy. In addition, the econometric model allows for economies of scale such that at various points it is advantageous to move on to new technologies (for example switching manufacture from farm hand-tools to iron ploughs). On the other hand, producing lots of swords – or muskets or rifles if your economy is large enough to make it worthwhile to upgrade to these weapons – often enables you to make military conquests.

Taking over a new province increases your workforce, just as having a food surplus does, but it can also have the added benefit of increasing your resource wealth. In the end, the victory conditions of the game encourage you to concentrate on guns rather than butter, at least in the long term, for it is no good having a rich economy if someone else can just march in and take it over. Just ask Kuwait.

Military Orders

The wargame section of **Guns or Butter** is barely more complex than **Risk**. Troops can be moved to adjacent provinces and, if upon doing so they find the province occupied by enemy troops, combat ensues.

Military Execution

The term 'military execution' refers to the combat resolution phase of the game, not a firing squad. In a combat situation the respective firepowers of the warring factions in the province are compared to make a strength ratio. The stronger force wipes out the weaker. Obviously, to succeed in combat you have to have a high firepower rating. This is determined by

Designed by
Chris Crawford

Published by
Mindscape

Price £34.99

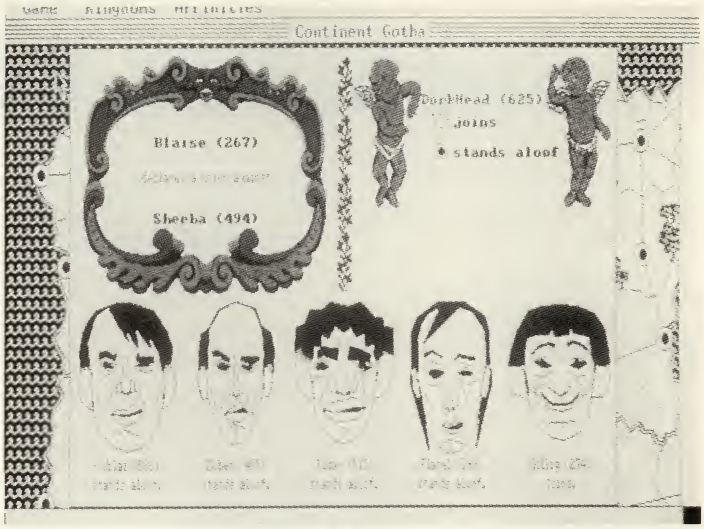
Available for Apple Macintosh and PC
Reviewed on the PC

the amount of armed troops you move into a province and also the type of weaponry those troops are using. In the early stages of the game the only viable weapons are swords but later it becomes possible to manufacture gunpowder in sufficient quantities to make muskets worthwhile, and then ultimately rifles make muskets obsolete, and so on, all the way up to tanks on the expert level. Combat favours the defender such that he gets an automatic firepower bonus while the attacker either gets a small or sizable downward adjustment to his firepower, depending on whether he is attacking along a road or not.

The military aspect of the game is simplistic but this reflects the designer's credo of not overdoing the 'bells and whistles'. The standard military practice of having your troops deployed at the business end of the war rather than behind the front lines holds true in this game, and it's only when your empire starts getting a bit large that this becomes a logistical challenge. It's generally worth trying to annex provinces that are rich resources although the opportunity for a quick overrun of a poorly defended, fairly barren territory is also worthwhile, as its capture will add to your workforce and arable land.

Economic Union

Guns or Butter has similarities with a number of multi-player board wargames, such as **After the Holocaust**, but of course, it is not a multi-player game. Consequently, without the recourse of being able to gang up on the leader as you would be able to in a board game, the chances of catching a player once he has become dominant are slim. The economic union phase attempts to redress this problem.



The phase is only featured in expert level mode, by which time you are battling with eight computer controlled players. These players will shift alliances among themselves and sometimes their alliances will include you (if you so choose) and sometimes they will ally against you. How often they do so depends on how often you upset them. Things that upset them include invading their provinces and joining alliances against them.

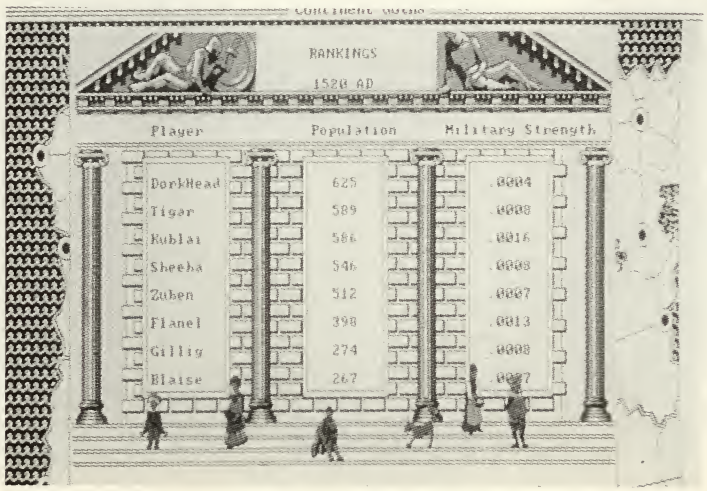
Being part of a union is limiting in that you lose control of your economy for one turn; the power that formed the alliance controls your economy and the economies of all the others in the alliance in order to form one super economy, thus achieving economy of scale – and then some! Also, when you are part of a union you may only attack the enemy against whom the alliance was formed. The whole concept has a bit of the feel of 'Balance of Power Revisited'.

Conclusion

Experienced wargamers will probably find this game a piece of cake. The combat system is easy to grasp and once the trick of building up a war economy has been mastered, it is a simple matter of grinding your way to victory.

Those who only dabble in wargames or who enjoy a good session of variables-adjusting will probably find it more challenging and I sense that it is at this type of player that the game is aimed, for the designer's notes tell of large quantities of game features being discarded in order to preserve the simplicity of the game. This simplicity extends to the presentation of the game which has unspectacular graphics and which is, even on colour monitors, mostly in black and white. What colour there is, however, is shrewdly used and the minimalist approach is a refreshing change.

Macintosh II owners should note that the map on their machines is entirely in monochrome because of 'the huge amounts of RAM' a colour map would have consumed. IBM owners may like to know that as well as supporting EGA and VGA colour the game also works on CGA, EGA and MCGA monochrome monitors. I found the game enjoyable but not addictive, largely because the whole game is geared towards the single aim of creating a war machine. I am normally the last to advocate complicating a game just for complexity's sake, but I feel this game could have done with some of the extra features Chris Crawford expunged, such as a trading system. A good complex game is made up of lots of interrelated *simple* mechanics and enough interrelations to keep Lucretia Borgia happy, there in not enough variety in the choice of strategies to make it wholly satisfying. SP



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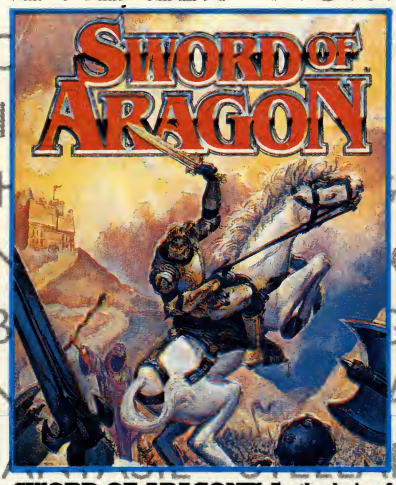

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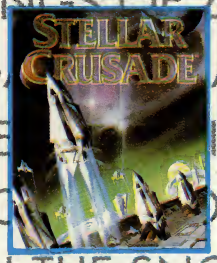

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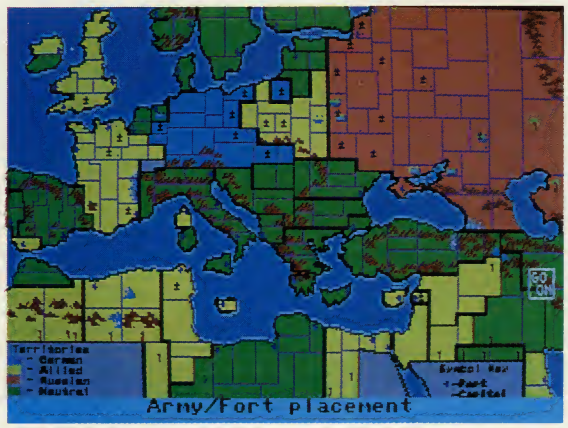
STORM ACROSS EUROPE

The War in Europe 1939-1945

by Gary Bolton



Storm Across Europe is SSI's grand strategic level game on the European theatre of operations circa 1939-1945. The game has been available for some time on the C64. My knowledge of this version is limited but this latest offering looks very similar, graphically at least. The game is easy to get into thanks to the excellent documentation supplied. Loading is straightforward and requires no disk swapping. Another plus is that it is realistically playable in a single session. A minus, however, is that you have to save frequently as there appears to be a bug that pops during the German naval moves causing the game to lock up. The game can be played by up to three players.

Efficiency

The game map covers all of Europe, including European Russia, plus North Africa and the Middle East. The playing area is divided into regions which are rated for terrain and economic value. Units are army and fleet sized with one strength point per 5000 men. Play is divided into sequential player turns: German, Soviet, then Allied, with each turn breaking down into phases for reinforcement, movement and combat. There are four seasonal turns each year with differences in the actions which can be performed in each.

The reinforcement phase allows the player to allocate the new forces that are received that season. The number and type produced is determined each spring in the production phase. The player has a wide range of unit types to produce, including various types of land units, naval units and air units. He may also choose to increase industrial capacity or fortify.

Each spring the specific production types and quantities are set for the following year. The player also has the option to spend resources on research.

During the movement phase each unit has unlimited movement within the territory of the owning player. The number of attacks a unit can perform is dependent on the season and the unit types of the forces involved. For example, a mechanised force could theoretically make four attacks during a summer season. There are various special types of attack including bomber or missile attacks on industry, amphibious attacks and air drops which are only applicable for special unit types. Once all moves and attacks have been plotted, combat then occurs.

The efficiency of the forces involved is modified for supply, weather, combined arms, and a number of other factors. The result is then used as a multiplier of unit strength which is used to determine chance of success, losses on both sides, and thus the overall result. If an attack is successful then other plotted attacks will take place. Losses are divided up among the component units involved in a combat according to the type of attack. For example, paratroopers suffer high losses in drop missions, and escorts protect transports and amphibious forces during sea movement.

Strategic attacks are resolved against the industrial capabilities of the attacked nation. Certain units such as subs, fleets, and air units in adjacent areas, can interdict sea areas during the opponent's turn, inflicting losses on convoys and attempted invasions. If these forces are strong enough they can repel the attacks. Thus the German player has good reason to invade the Mediterranean islands (Malta and Crete) and any invasion across the Channel is dependent on naval and air superiority.

One of the results of combat is to reduce the efficiency of the participating units. It is therefore important that players take care to rotate units and give tired forces opportunity to recover. A bit of a cheat is that forces moved from one unit to another gain the efficiency of the target unit.

Hitler's War

Overall this is an excellent strategic level game which provides an adequate, but unimaginative, opponent to the lone gamer. Additional play value can be gained from tinkering with the starting levels and deployment of forces. The neutrals and minor allies rules, the technology rules, and the option to customise each scenario, all ensure that two games need never be the same. Where **Storm Across Europe** comes into its own is when played as a multi-player game. Here it is as good as any board game on this scale (two which spring to mind are MB's **Axis and Allies** and Avalon Hill's **Hitler's War**). Since the turn sequence is taken care of by the computer the players can concentrate on finding different approaches to the problem of winning the war.

In my view **Storm Across Europe** owes a considerable and unacknowledged debt to **Hitler's War** which is no bad thing. The game allows the solitaire player to replay the western half of the Second World War on a manageable scale. Fans of multi-player games will find this every bit as good as a boardgame, but without the problem of recording positions when refreshment or sleep beckons. SP

Designed by
Dan Cermak

Published by
SSI/US Gold

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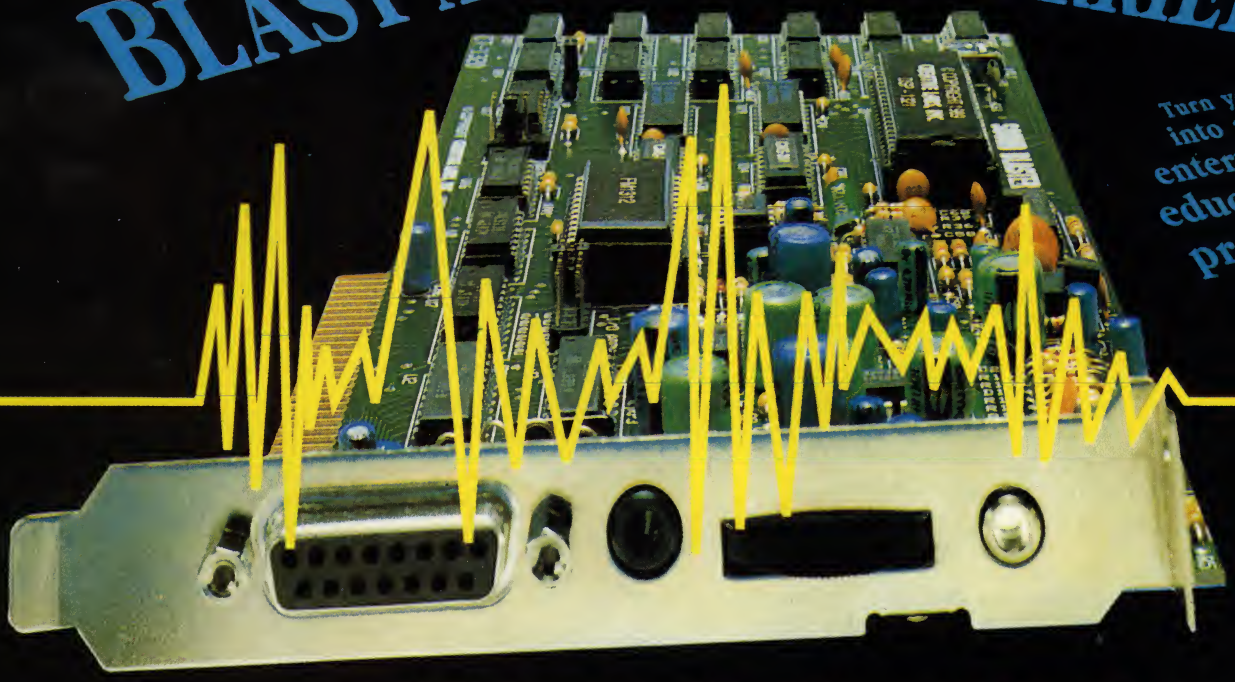

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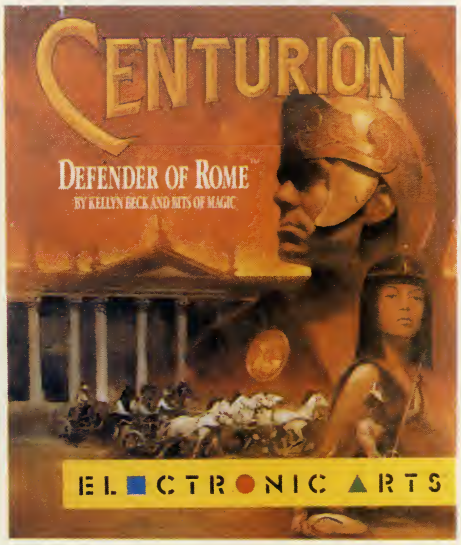
CENTURION

Defender of Rome

by Brian Walker



THE CO-DESIGNER of this game, Kellyn Beck, has a portfolio that includes design credits for **Defender of the Crown** and **Rocket Ranger**. This should immediately signal that we are not in simulation territory here. What we have is a hybrid of strategy, arcade action, and an *element* of simulation, all bundled together with some very good graphics and an excellent, if somewhat repetitive, soundtrack.

Centurion starts you out as a Roman officer circa 275 BC. Your modest aim is to rule the world. This is achieved by a combination of belligerence and diplomacy. The emphasis is on the former. Money to finance your grandiose plans come from taxes in home and occupied provinces. If these are set too high, though, the proles will revolt. Money can also be obtained through betting on the chariot races – in one of several sub-games provided. Conquest is simply a matter of moving your troops into an adjacent province. Normally the residents will resist, though they will succumb to diplomatic overtures when you become powerful enough.

If combat occurs a battle screen pops up. The battle sequences themselves are, like the game itself, something of a mixed bag. Although you get to decide formations and plan of attack, you are left with the feeling that you are not actually doing as much as you think you are, irrespective of the result. There is also a certain repetitiveness to these sequences, caused by your populace being in a more or less constant state of revolt. As a consequence you start to get that 'Oh, not again' feeling as a new bunch of rabble attempt to take you on.

Novelty

For the strategist there is probably too much of a novelty element to the game, though in fairness **Centurion** does not have any historical pretensions. The manual does not even offer any background notes pertaining to the period, and is also amiss in failing to point out what gain can be acquired from specific actions. This leaves the player in a sort of 'suck it and see' position. Otherwise the description of the actual mechanics of the game is fine. In most games with strategic (or puzzle solving) overtones, action sequences are about as welcome to me as a shark in a swimming pool. Here, though, they suit the overall tone; well handled, but on the light side. More *Ben Hur* than *Satyricon*. Like the Fellini film, the superb graphics make up for much and will no doubt help the game sell to its target market – presumably those gamers who prefer a light hearted romp with a strategic element thrown in.

In summation, **Centurion** still leaves the challenge of producing the definitive game on the Roman Empire unresolved. How about PSS's **Annals of Rome**, West End's **Imperium Romanum**, and Avalon Hill's **Circus Maximus**, all combined with the graphics and easy interface of **Centurion**? An era that inspired such talents as diverse as Frankie Howerd and Frederico Fellini deserves no less. SP

Rome Sweet Rome: The Map from Centurion

Designed by
Kellyn Beck and Nicky Robinson

Published by
Electronic Arts

Price £24.99 (ST and Amiga), £29.99 (PC)

Available for the PC, ST and Amiga
Reviewed on the PC

CGA, EGA, VGA, MCGA

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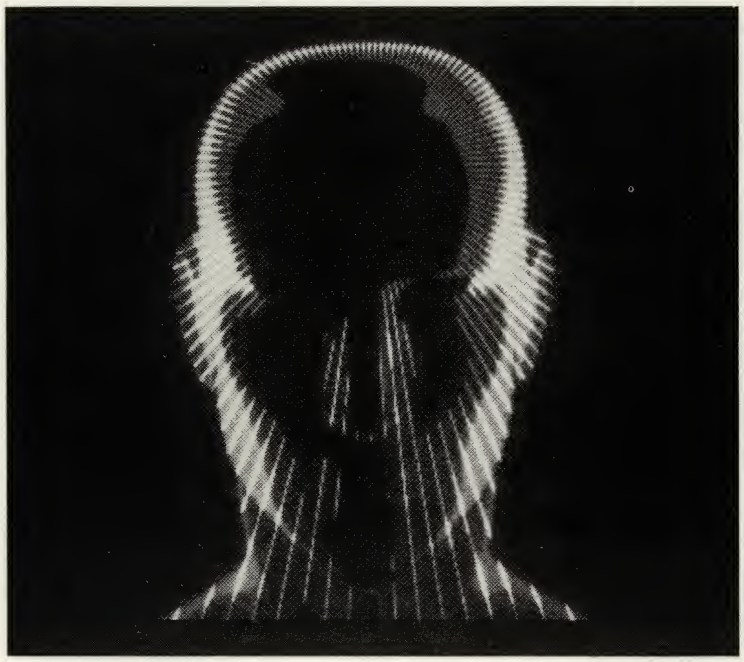
IMPERIUM

Voting Time on Venus

by Brian Walker



Despite providing the source material for films such as *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall*, the novels of the great science fiction writer Philip K Dick have not, hitherto, proved to be have been much of an influence on game designers, though what a great adventure game *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* would make if any software house had the balls to confront the acid laced subject matter.

A Dick type drug of a more innocuous kind makes an appearance in this latest offering from Electronic Arts: Nostrum, the life preserving drug, supplies of which are vital if you and your henchmen are to go the distance. The distance in this case is 1000 years. The alternate victory condition is to conquer all other empires.

We Can Build You

Imperium uses a 'custom designed' windows system to access the vast number of menus in the game. Indeed without such a system it's difficult to see how so much data could have made so accessible. It's as though the designers wanted to include something from every space game on the market and then some. Economics, trade, combat, diplomacy, and more originally, elections and population control all play a part in the game, while in the production phase you can build everything from robots to religious items. Each is a virtual game in itself, and it's a credit to the design team that they've managed to pull them all together to form a cohesive whole.

The key to success is understanding the interrelationships between all these factors. As you may have deduced this makes for a very complex game even by the standards of the genre (**Reach For the Stars** and **Stellar Crusade** for example). The economic game alone comprises trade, a sophisticated import/export system, and taxation. Combat employs a similarly lateral approach – total and individual strengths, together with your tactics, are run through a mammoth matrix to produce a result. No high score tables in this game. Elections are mandatory every fifty years, though they may be called earlier. Success here depends on careful placement of your subordinates, two of whom will oppose you on the hustings. If you lose the vote the game is over and you disappear into a black hole. This political aspect of the game is cleverly done and certainly not shallow like so many games-within-games.

A Scanner Darkly

The windows/menu/icon approach handles all this very well and information can be easily accessed. The manual makes a brave stab at explaining everything but doesn't help itself by using a tiny 2pt italic typeface to explain the ramifications of your actions. A tutorial, which runs you though a year in the life of a galaxy, is provided but this could easily have been extended so that the 'cause and effects' of your actions could have been examined more.

Imperium is not a barrel of laughs. It is very dry and made even drier by the dreary graphics which resemble nothing so much as the output of a 100 dpi scanner. Black and white just doesn't cut it any more, especially in a game such as this where colour would provide vital relief from the endless monochrome reports.

It could be argued that there is almost too much in the game, but that's really a question of individual taste. If it has any antecedents, in addition to the games mentioned earlier, then it is the vast space empire games run by professional Play-by-Mail companies, whose gargantuan computer generated print-outs find their way through thousands of letterboxes every week. The learning curve in the game is considerable as you can imagine, but whatever its flaws it certainly offers value for money. **Imperium** is a game that could last a millennium. SP

Designed by
Nick Wilson and Matthew Stibbe

Published by
Electronic Arts

Price £24.99

Available on all formats
Reviewed on the ST

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BREACH 2

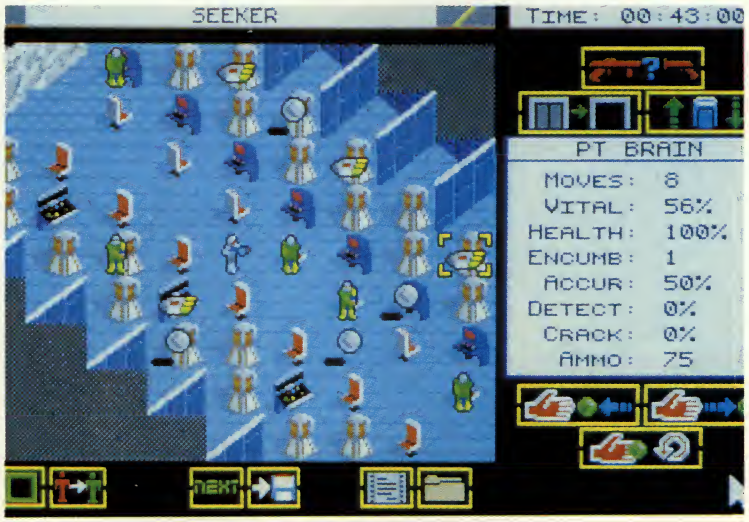
Squad Leader in Space

by Mike Woodhouse

DID YOU ever read *Starship Troopers? The Forever War? Janissaries* even? Or maybe you've played **Squad Leader**? If you have, then you should have a notion of what this game's about: science fiction squad level combat with just a hint of role-playing. Join the Federated Worlds Special Forces, travel to strange planets, meet interesting aliens and kill them.

The original version of **Breach** was published in 1987, to a reasonably warm reception. This is a complete rewrite, offering a much-improved user interface (mouse driven using icons, but now with keypad alternatives), graphics, sound and, most importantly, gameplay.

To start a game, you must create a squad leader (up to 4 may be active at any time). A character always starts with the rank of Ensign, and your overall objective is to rise to the rank of Fleet Admiral, a mere matter of ten promotions away. Promotion comes through successful completion of missions, but is not automatic: you have to acquit yourself in an appropriately courageous manner. The missions are dangerous, but getting killed does not mean starting from scratch: your character continues (rationalise it as a stored clone if you need an explanation). Your starting attributes are, to be honest, a bit pathetic. It's your job to improve your skills by practising: no pain, no gain.



Struggle

The game comes with a set of 10 scenarios, rated from Easy to Very Hard. Each has one or more objectives, such as kill a set percentage of the enemy forces, rescue prisoners, destroy certain objects or just reach the exit area! To date, I haven't finished either of the Easy scenarios, but have been successful with both the Mediums. Once you get to the Hard and Very Hard scenarios, be prepared for a long and painful struggle. The variety of missions is excellent; each has its own set of different problems, helped by the range of terrain and object types available to designers. A scenario builder is supplied, for those who want to refight particular favourites, and Omnitrend have already issued a campaign disk of extra missions in the US.

Each scenario involves your chosen squad leader with a group of up to nine marines: scouts, marauders (basic combat troops), infiltrators (adept at using detection and computer gear) and psionic talents (useful for stunning meat opponents). The exact mix varies from mission to mission. Up against you are a selection from a variety of nasties. In the animal camp are beasts (tyrannosaurs), terradons (flying reptiles) and wadgels (a cross between a weasel and a porcupine). Machine enemies consist of robots (drawn from *Lost In Space*, except they now think that everybody is Doctor Smith!), tanks, gun emplacements (heavy lasers) and bipeds (another type of robot). Marauders are humanoid and use the same weaponry as your marines – very dangerous. Lastly, seekers are extremely nasty floating orbs with psi powers as well as lasers and can only be destroyed by remote charges (although they can be stunned, thank goodness).

Zaps

Your troops can carry a variety of weapons, the encumbrance limit dictated by the marine's basic type. Laser pistols and rifles, grenades and rockets form the basic armoury, while proximity charges (mines), remote charges and neutron bombs offer more exotic (and difficult to use) potential for mayhem. Other useful hardware includes crack units (for hacking into alien hardware), detectors (to locate enemy units), camouflage suits and smoke grenades. It is sometimes possible to find additional equipment lying around, but don't bank on it – assume you'll be limited to what you start with and don't waste anything.

In play, the game moves pretty rapidly, marines making all their moves (a fairly standard movement point system is used throughout) and then the enemy doing likewise. I could have done with slightly less being possible between these phases: it's quite possible for an enemy to appear from nowhere and lob a gre-

Designed by
Thomas R Carbone

Published by
Omnitrend
Software/Impressions

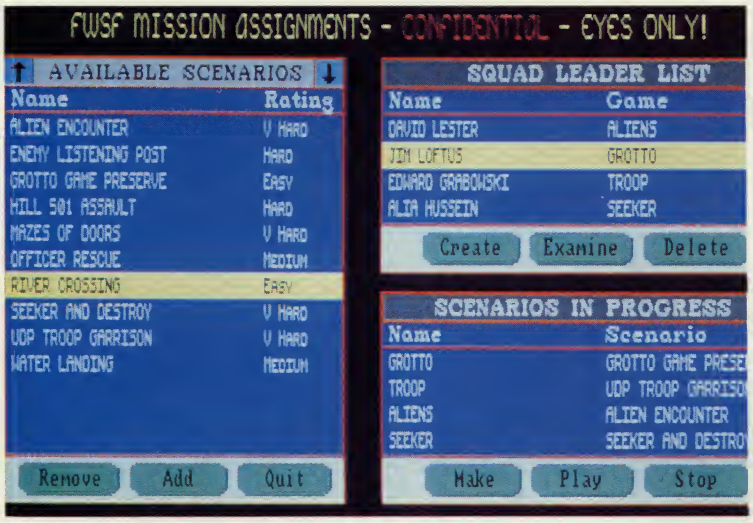
Price £24.99

Available for all formats
Reviewed on ST

CGA, EGA, VGA

Requires 512K

AdLib soundboard supported



nade into the middle of your squad (grenades really hurt!) without your being able to do a thing about it. On the other hand, it does make you think about your moves more carefully after it has happened a few times. Sound is used sparingly but to good effect (satisfying zaps, booms and screams), but 520ST owners are warned that all sound effects will not be heard, for memory reasons (the correct design decision).

One minor niggle: it would be nice to be able to get a list of what each marine is carrying, ideally with an option to print it. I found that I needed the information constantly during play and found a handwritten list essential.

The manual is large enough, at 40 pages, and is easy to get into, being logically and clearly laid out. The game is not copy protected, and back-ups are no problem. Security is by the fairly standard word-from-the-manual system. The game is supplied on two single-sided disks which can be copied to a double-sider without hassles. The fairly long load and file creation times (each playing of a scenario requires the creation of a new file) make the use of a RAM disk advisable if memory permits.

This is a fine piece of software, absorbing and varied. It has very few weaknesses, each of which is far outweighed by its many strengths. If the promised interaction with future Omnitrend products (wherein **Breach 2** should provide the detailed level of higher-level combat simulations) occurs then it will get even better. SP

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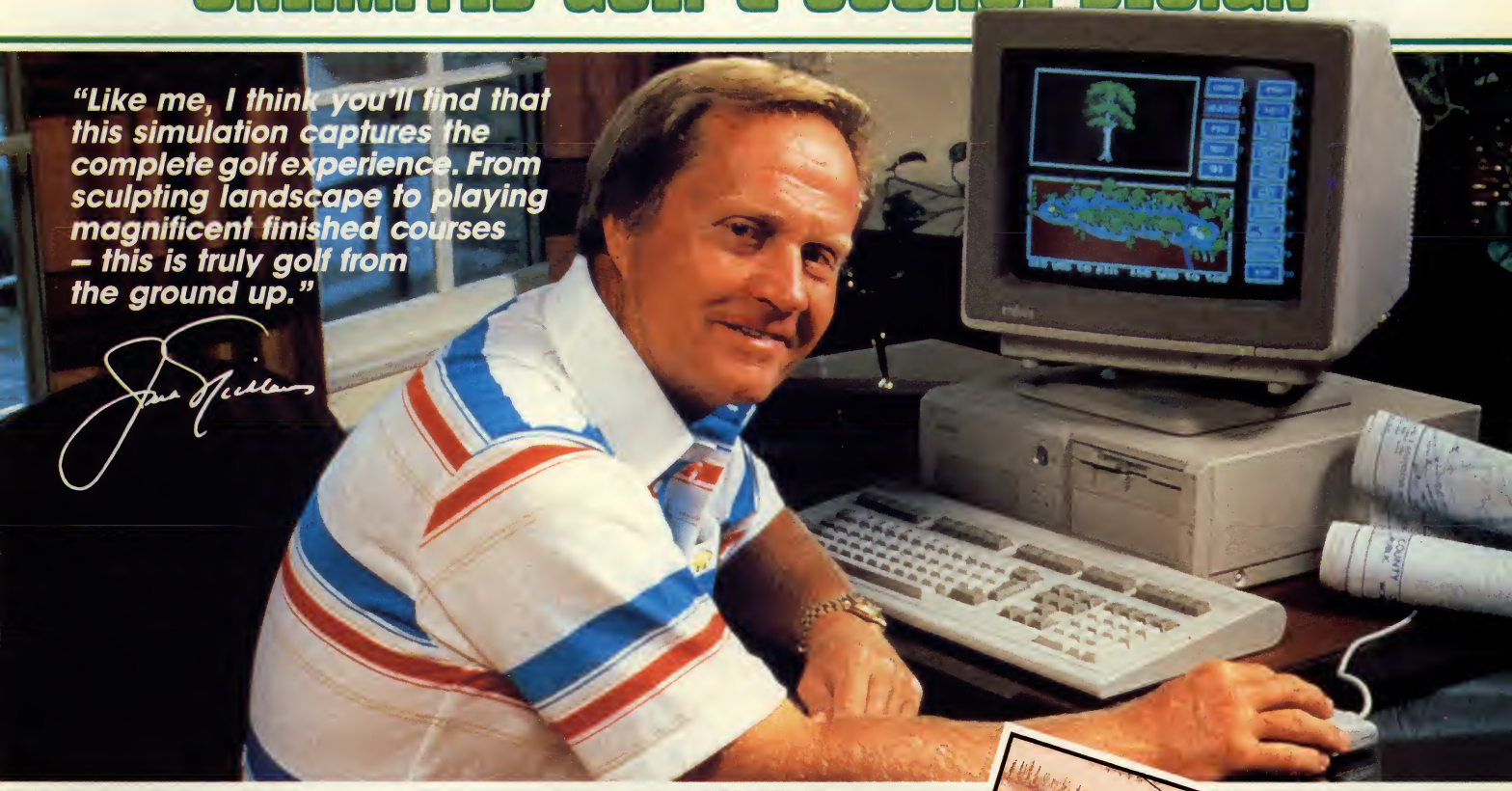
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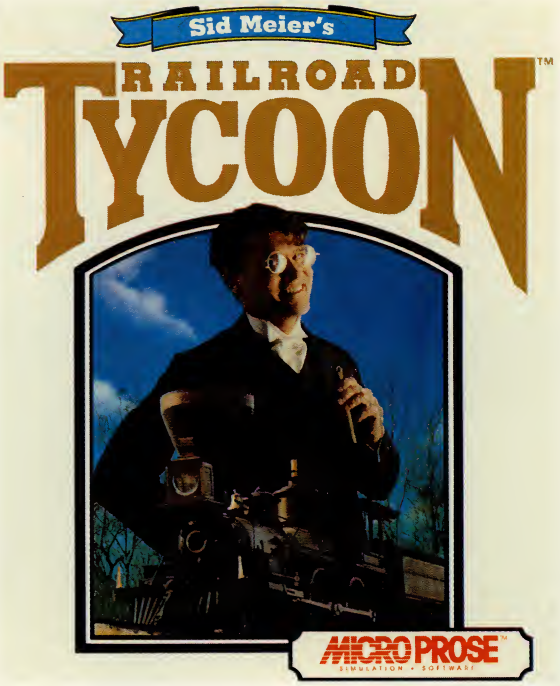


Strategy in Microprose's Railroad Tycoon

by Brian Walker

ONCE in a while a game comes along that challenges one's definition of the term. **Sim City** for example, gave a whole new meaning to town planning. More recently **Railroad Tycoon** has threatened to do for railways what sound did for the cinema. **Tycoon**, though, is not just Walt Disney's version of model railroading. At its heart there is a game (in the true sense of the word) as tough as you'll ever encounter. Grown men will weep as they wave their lovingly constructed railroad goodbye. No gold watch, just a one way ticket from Dodge donated by the outraged shareholders. This article is an attempt to help you avoid this fate. Of course there are those players to whom such advice is anathema. Macho men of the railroads, now is the time for you to turn to page 22. For the rest of you, read on.

Designed by
Sid Meier & Bruce Shelley

Published by
Microprose

Price £34.99

Available for the PC
Amiga version due early next year

EGA, VGA

AdLib soundboard supported

The Early Years

It is vital you get the first three turns right if you are to progress, for this is a game where the slippery slope is steep. The first major decision is choice of starting towns. Obviously they should be of a significant size. Ideally you should build a terminal in a large town flanked by two smaller towns and then run trains to each. 'Named' trains add 25% to passenger revenue. Try to get your trains christened as quick as possible by sending your first one out with just a mail car. Avoid bridges, tunnels, and if possible, inclines.

On your first turn do not connect more than three towns. The reason for this frugality is to enable you to buy shares in your own company. 50% to be precise. Buy at least 30% on the first turn, and the remaining 20% by the end of turn three. Hold onto these come what may, otherwise you'll soon find yourself on that midnight train to Georgia. Sell bonds if you have to, but never have more than three outstanding, unless you have a good motive such as a takeover. When the economic climate turns to 'boom', repay them all – fund this action by buying three new ones at the preferential rate of interest. When it looks as though you're going to have a good year (boom economy, good priority runs), invest in your own company and then sell at a profit.

After your initial construction, don't build again until the economy goes into recession or panic when the costs are much cheaper. Once you've discovered a profitable route then double track, again waiting for a panic or recession before building.

Rate Wars

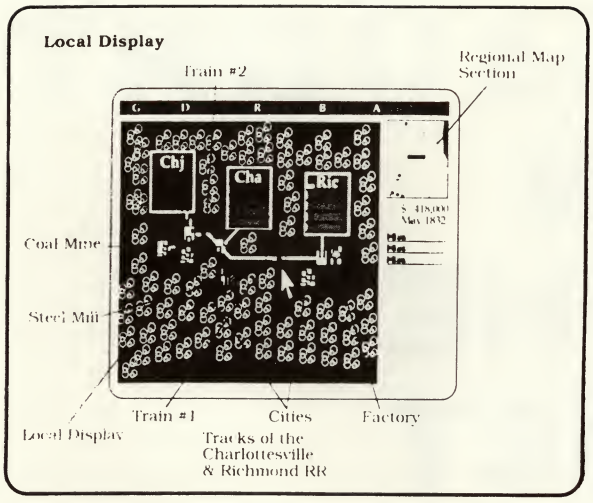
You'll note that your rivals have a nasty habit of building their inferior networks alarmingly close to your own, thus limiting your chances of expanding your empire. The answer here is to get your retaliation in first; launch a rate war against them before they do it to you. The attack should be planned like a military exercise. Identify their main supply points and then select one which will give you one town and annex another. Don't go attacking depots. Once you've chosen your target, build a depot the minimum permissible distance from the target town. Don't worry if it doesn't even supply one sheep a year, that's not the point. Double track from the depot to the target station and then run two trains in tandem. Don't go crazy and route all your trains there, instead just drop off at the depot and deadhead back, using the 'wait' option at the warring station when appropriate. Of course you won't get diddly for the depot drops, but you'll make up for that with the double revenue bonus in the turn following the war. Defensively, a rather sneaky tactic is to curl your line around your stations in a almost a complete circle thus preventing your rivals building in (the wagon train strategy).

Takeovers

To attain a respectable position at the end of the game you really*must* control at least one other company. The best time to go for a takeover is in the early stages when companies are just being formed. Be sure to have lots of cash in hand so you don't have to waste time on the dog to the broker. This means selling bonds. Wait until the economy is in prosperity or boom and then sell until you have a cash balance of about $2.5m. As soon as a company is formed buy 10 000 shares, freeze the game and check it's

location. If its in a decent sized resource centre continue buying until you acquire a majority holding. If its in the middle of Siberia then keep buying, but don't pay the double rate demanded if you are unable to effect a quick swoop (never hold more than 60% in a company whose prospects look bleak). Instead, sell the shares you have just bought immediately.

If you are able to take over the company without paying over the odds, then bleed it to death. The most efficient way to do this is first reduce its cash flow by grabbing any money in the kitty. Next, sell 10 000 of your shares. The company will now buy back these shares. As soon as it does this buy back the 10 000 shares you just sold, nip along to the broker and pocket the change the company has left from the bond sale. Continue to do this until it has been bled dry. And don't forget to sell *all* your shares in the company when it can't be squeezed anymore. If you have taken over a company that you intend to run for the benefit of the stockholders then don't worry about paying double rate for the last remaining public share. In fact, try to acquire the maximum number of shares you can afford. As soon as you gain control instruct it to build to the nearest resource centre, even injecting cash if necessary. Gradually the price should rise and give you a handsome dividend on your shares.



The Stock Market

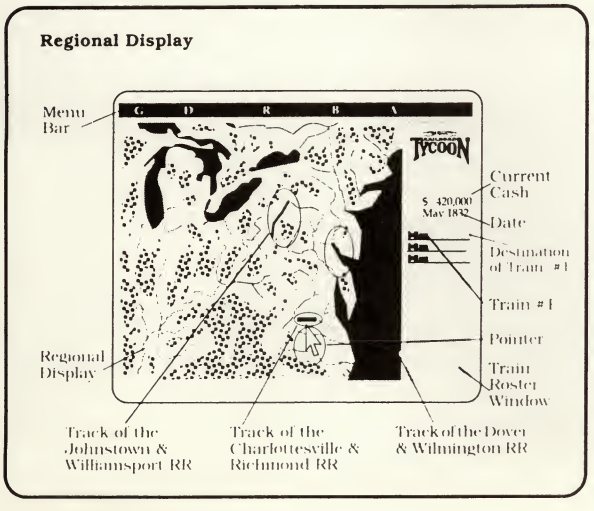
Creative accounting is not as easy as you might think. You can't just sell all your bonds, declare bankruptcy and then pocket the difference. Firstly, you can only go broke when you have a negative cash flow. Secondly, you lose all shares you possess. However, you don't lose fixed assets such as track, engines, and hotels. The solution then is to sell as many bonds as the economic climate permits. Following this, freeze the game then start building track and buying anything you fancy except shares. As soon as your cash balance hits the red zone pull the plug. Half your debts are wiped out and you are left with a potentially prosperous railroad.

Mail Trains

Often overlooked, these are very useful sources of revenue. To get the most out of them they must run unhindered. This means double tracking once you have established the key routes. In a recent game on the European map the mail train, pulling only two cars, from Dijon to Limoges emerged as the fourth most profitable run, despite being the eighteenth train on the roster.

Timetable

The latest from Microprose on the game is that an Amiga version will appear 'later this year'. This should include an 'improved mouse interface'. Microprose (US) are shortly to issue a correction disk which should exterminate some of the minor bugs in the game. Early next year should see the release of expansion disks containing new maps and possibly a map builder. Toot! Toot! SP



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CAUGHT IN THE NET

by Max Matrix

Sources lurking around the principle fantasy convention in the States, GENCON, have revealed a wondrous new, role-playing game called **Jorune**, to be published by Skyrealms Publications before Christmas. Spies report that the PC EGA version has very presentable graphics, a whole new batch of weird and wonderful monsters and an in-depth plot.

Walking past an open window of the Sierra offices the other day I spied Ken Williams trimming his moustache in front of a mirror held by Al Lowe.

'So when's the next Larry game going to arrive, then, eh?' asked Ken, snipping a little off the side.

'Oh, nothing scheduled, but you never know with Larry. By the way, I hear that another **Camelot** is planned?'

'Yeah. Ouch – blast these scissors – though it's not under way yet. But our Jim is doing a follow up to **Iceman** as we speak. Could you just move that mirror a little to the ri... yeah, that's fine.'

'What's cookin' with **Police Quest**? Ain't heard too much from that direction.'

'Jim may do another Quest but he said he was busy on a 14-7 at the moment, or was that a 12-4, or maybe... whatever, he's busy chasing villains. Well whaddya think of the face?'

'Hmmm. Hey Ken! Not bad – very Che Guevara. Should go down well at the next CES.'

'Heh, speaking about goin' down, I hear Electronic Arts' **Fountain of Dreams** has been knocked on the head.'

'Really? Wasn't that the RPG created by one of the authors of **Wasteland**?'

'S'right, with the graphic artist from **Escape from Hell**.'

'What's EA doin' writing a game about Roberta's cooking, then? Hee hee hee.'

Very odd. Al's a nice guy, though. Someone asked him what it was like being 'Al Lowe' and he said, 'It's a dirty job but someone's gotta do it.'

Dirty jobs are what **Retaliator II** is all about. Ocean's sequel to, erm... **Retaliator I**, turns your lonely old pilot into a leader of a quick reaction task force ready to quell the foe wherever in the world he may strike. Bit like *Thunderbirds,* I suppose.

So where's the CD-TV, then? According to Fat Agnes and Paula, down at the saloon, Commodore's been having lots of problems with the Amiga 3000, so they've had to pull people off CD-TV while things are put to rights.

George Alec Effinger, now there's a name to chew on. He's a cyberpunk author in the same mould as William Gibson (*Neuromancer).* Ol' George was the author of *Circuit's Edge,* Infocom's last game (sob). It has been reported that George, him being such an Infocom fan 'n'all, was working on a novel based upon the **Zork** Trilogy. The book was due out at the end of this year. I wonder what will happen now that Infocom have gone and Mediagenic/Activision have all but vanished. Might be a nice epitaph, though.

Those of you who laughed when you heard that Avalon Hill's conversion of their own boardgame, **Third Reich**, would come out on the ST first can now have a literal mega chuckle. It now transpires that you will need a 1 meg machine to run it! As there are probably more Skodas than STs in the US, halving what is already a tiny market does not seem an especially bright idea.

Trouble down in Texas. Spare a thought for Steve Jackson Games down in the Lone Star state. Earlier this year it were busted by the US Secret Service in a raid more reminiscent of Stalinist Russia than the Land of the Free. In appropriately dramatic style the raid was coded 'Operation Sun Devil'. After breaking down the (inevitably) unlocked doors with sledgehammers, the SS carted off a load of valuable hardware, closed down the bulletin board SJG use for its games, and arrested an employee (who was subsequently released without being charged). Four months later *some* of the hardware has been returned, much of it damaged. *None* of the files containing material for their role-playing games have been returned. SJG has been forced to lay off half its staff and claim that the raid has cost them $125 000. The SS, for its part, at first suggested that the reason for the bust was that SJG's **GURPS Cyberpunk** was a 'handbook for computer crime'. However, they are now saying that SJG was 'not the real target' which must be scant consolation to their laid off employees. Even worse, the company now faces possible bankruptcy. SP

ON LINE WITH SIERRA

by Theo Clarke

SIERRA On-line Inc is known in the UK as the company responsible for **Leisure Suit Larry.** The organisation is seen to be lodged in the dwindling adventure games niche and everybody knows that adventures have had their day. So how come Sierra sells 25% of the computer games sold in the US? Why does Sierra arouse such a powerful brand loyalty in its customers? Why are three hundred employees insufficient to meet the demands of its marketplace? Play a few Sierra games and you should understand the answers to these questions. Let us not beat about the bush. I think that Sierra produces the best computer games available.

When Kirk Green, Sierra's Director of Public Relations, came to the UK in June to make a number of announcements about the company's plans for the future, *Strategy Plus* sent me along to see him. His wit, enthusiasm and professionalism epitomise the characteristics that have made Sierra games so popular. His presentation was lively and funny but there were repeated references to the importance of quality. 'Sierra want to be the Rolls Royce of games'. 'The games industry is like the movies. Make *one* trash product and you are a trash company'.

The movie analogy is popular at Sierra. Its games are developed by teams of about two dozen people and their job titles are redolent of Hollywood: the project manager for a game is the Producer. Ken Williams, the company's president, is the 'Executive Producer' of the games.

Sierra started in May 1980 when Roberta and Ken Williams released an adventure game for an Apple II microcomputer. That game was **Mystery House** and it was unusual in that it had graphics as well as text. The company grew steadily, publishing games for a wide range of machines. It even moved into the doomed cartridges market and IBM asked it to develop a new game that would exploit the 16-colour graphics of the new PCjr. The game was Roberta Williams's **King's Quest I**. Its use of animated figures in colour was revolutionary but the graphics support of the PCjr was not standard on other IBM PCs.

When the PCjr failed, the market for **King's Quest** vanished. This was in 1984. At that time the whole future of home computing in the US was looking uncertain. Hardware manufacturers were withdrawing products from the market and Sierra seemed to be going under. Fortunately this was the point at which Tandy chose to launch its Tandy 1000 computer. It was a massive success and, because it supported the PCjr graphics, it provided a new market for **King's Quest**. It also meant that Tandy would sell Sierra games in their thousands of shops and the survival of Sierra was assured.

The popularity of the Tandy 1000 made MS-DOS the standard for the home computer market. Because of its work on the PCjr Sierra was one of the few games companies with experience of this operating system and it was able to exploit this expertise.

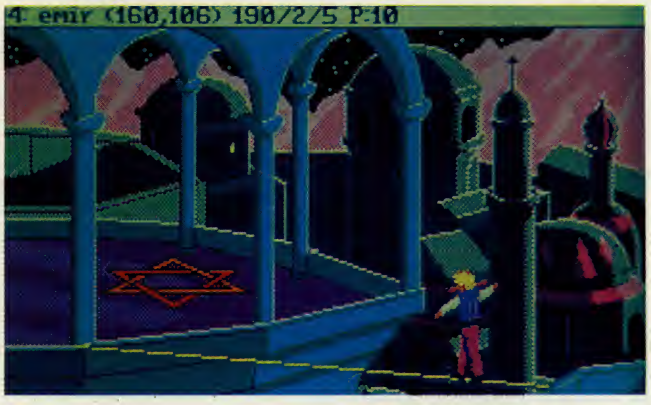
People may have forgotten some of Sierra's past successes (**Wizard and the Princess**, **Frogger**, **Crossfire**, **BC's Quest For Tires**, **Softporn Adventure** and **Fuzzywomp** are among those no longer available) but the use of sequels has increased the life of **King's Quest**, **Space Quest** and **Leisure Suit Larry**. Sierra has sold six million copies of the games in the **King's Quest** series.

Mars Bar: Space Quest IV

Synthesised

Since 1984 the company has been primarily concerned with MS-DOS games for PC compatible machines but it also releases games in Amiga, Atari ST and Macintosh formats. It has tried to make the most of the available technology.

Most modern computer games are written in special programming languages designed for games. These games development languages are themselves written in established languages like BASIC, Assembler, Pascal or C and they have become bigger, faster and more sophisticated. **King's Quest I** was written using a system called AGI (Adventure Game Interpreter). In 1988 Sierra started to develop products in SCI (Sierra Creative Interpreter) which has higher



Perfect Balance: Hero's Quest II

quality animation as one of its more obvious features. Because SCI is bigger than AGI it needs to be run on a larger or faster PC than was necessary for AGI. Because of this **King's Quest IV** was released in both versions although only the SCI version is available from shops. This was to allow players of the first three games to play the fourth on their old computer. In the event, few people have taken up this option and the SCI version has sold remarkably fast.

SCI supports sophisticated musical effects, and synthesised soundtracks have been used for the SCI games. Sierra helped users into this new area by selling synthesiser cards (that fit inside the PC to make music) at competitive prices.

The PCjr graphics standard used 16 colours. An earlier IBM standard used four colours and was called CGA. Up to now Sierra graphics (like those of most games manufacturers) have been based on the IBM EGA (Enhanced Graphics Adaptor) standard. This uses up to 64 colours at about twice the resolution of CGA. The successor to EGA was VGA (Video Graphics Array) which uses 256 colours at a resolution better than a TV can handle. Future Sierra games will support VGA graphics. The designers have used normal airbrushed pictures which they scan electronically instead of using computer graphics directly. This is capable of yielding very subtle, fluid images.

Another technical development to be exploited by Sierra is the use of Compact Discs (CDs) as the storage media for the games. A CD can hold the equivalent of 1800 floppy disks and costs little more than twice the price to produce. The use of CDs like this is known as CD-ROM and although CD-ROM players (or drives) are still quite rare Sierra is going to 'seed the market' in the same way that it did with the synthesisers. It intends to sell a 'bundle' consisting of a CD-ROM drive, a Digital Audio Controller card (which links the drive to the PC) and two games at $700 before Christmas 1990. Because CD manufacture is expensive at low volumes we can expect CD games to cost between $60 and $80 (£40 to £55) but high volume sales could pull these prices down to below the price of diskette-based games.

CD-ROM has other advantages besides reducing the number of storage units needed to package the game. It enables the developers to enhance the game greatly without concern for space constraints. A scene had to be removed from **Conquests Of Camelot** (an adventure game about the Arthurian quest for the Grail) because it made the game just too large for the 10 diskettes that can be fitted in Sierra's current boxes. This would not be a problem on a CD and the additional space can be used to hold memory-hungry features such as digital speech in multiple languages.

Polished

So, how is Sierra going to exploit all of this new technology?

King's Quest I – Quest For The Crown has been rereleased in a version converted to SCI (Sierra Creative Interpreter, remember). Edward, King of Daventry (look... the game was developed by Americans. They think that Daventry sounds romantic) is childless so he sends his favourite knight, Sir Graham, to recover three stolen treasures as a test of his worthiness to be heir to the crown. This is a fantasy game without violence. The emphasis is on solving puzzles not on breaking heads. Although the story remains unchanged the graphics are much more polished and there is a fully orchestrated score that sounds like a film soundtrack. This new version should be available in the UK in July.

The wonderful children's game **Mixed-up Mother Goose** has undergone the same revamping. In this charming game a young child can journey to a magic land to help Mother Goose find the missing pieces to her rhymes. When the mixed-up rhyme is sorted out the child is rewarded with the complete song and an animated sequence. The new version has no typing at all. It runs entirely from click-on icons so it is accessible to prereading children. **Mixed-up Mother Goose** will also be the first game that Sierra releases on CD. In this case the additional space on the CD has been used to support VGA graphics and fully digitised voices singing nursery rhymes in English, French, German, Spanish and Japanese. All of these languages are held on the one CD and the user can choose which one to use. This CD version is quite breathtaking in its quality and will be available in August.

The conversions to SCI will also be applied to the other established AGI classics in 1991 and after. **Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of The Lounge Lizards**, **Police Quest** and the other two King's Quest episodes are already scheduled for conversion.

The series of sequels that have done so much to establish Sierra's reputation all seem to be drawing to a close. **King's Quest V** is likely to be the last in that series. It will star King Graham of Daventry again and the screen shots that I have seen of the VGA version are absolutely stunning. (No... honestly... my notes said STUNNING!) The CD-ROM version will include synthesised speech. This should be available in three versions (EGA, VGA and CD-ROM) by Christmas and versions for Amiga, Atari ST and Macintosh are scheduled for 1991.

Space Quest IV: Roger Wilco and the Time Rippers is also the last in a series. Previous instalments have been joke science fiction adventures starring a janitor in space. This fourth episode will be in the same vein. It parodies the concept of sequels as Roger hops in and out of **Space Quest XII** while trying to avoid the Sequel Police who have come from the future with an end in mind. The end of Roger and the Space Quest series, that is. Fortunately Roger can call upon the assistance of the rebel Time Rippers and the amazonian Latex Babes of Estros. Bob Siebenburg of Supertramp has been called in again to provide a rousing musical accompaniment and the animators have used models and back mattes to give high-quality animation graphics. The EGA and VGA versions of the game should be available before Christmas and a CD-ROM version is also scheduled for release in 1991. It seems that the general policy for future products will be EGA first, VGA a month later, CD-ROM three months after the original release and other formats (such as Amiga, Atari ST and Macintosh) thereafter.

Spielburg

With the end of the first two Quest series we see the beginning of another. **Hero's Quest I – So You Want**

To Be A Hero was successful beyond everyone's expectations. It sold 75 000 copies in the first month and had passed the 100 000 mark within six months. **King's Quest** is notable for the lack of violence and the emphasis on negotiation, so **Hero's Quest** was Sierra's first contribution to the fantasy combat genre. The player can choose to be a Fighter, a Magic User or a Thief. If I need to explain the significance of this choice you are not likely to be interested in the game. In **Hero's Quest I** your character is newly arrived in the village of Spielburg. The villagers and the local Baron are having serious trouble with brigands and they need a champion. As a novice graduate of the Famous Adventurers' Correspondence School you fit the job description. You have to defeat the brigands, rescue the Baron's family and overcome such bizarre monsters as the bouncing Antwerp, while performing such incidental quests as finding the healer's lost ring. **Hero's Quest I** is everything that I expected to find in the meeting of Sierra adventures and fantasy role-playing.

Most fantasy role-playing campaigns start in a temperate European landscape. The valley of Spielburg was typical of this environment. **Hero's Quest II – Trial By Fire** is an adventure with an Arabian Nights flavour with the emphasis on magic, mystery and imagination. It is set in the desert with a city of good and one of evil. It will be possible to bring characters from **Hero's Quest I** into the new game to continue their adventures and these characters will be able to move on to the third and fourth games when they are released. The new game will be available in EGA and VGA but no date has been announced for a CD-ROM version.

Of course, one remains slightly chary of these claims of series coming to an end. The third **Leisure Suit Larry** was intended to be the last of that series but Al Lowe is already working on the fourth game and we can expect to see that in the spring of 1991. Whether this addition to the Larry canon was driven by enthusiasm or marketing is not clear. Bantam paperbacks are publishing a *Leisure Suit Larry Bedside Companion* in the US this autumn. This is likely to be funnier as a concept than it is in practice but I imagine that a lot of punters will want to read about Larry's 'first time', his tips on dating or the use of prophylactics. Sales of all the Larry products are likely to increase when the *Leisure Suit Larry* movie or TV series is released. Several large organisations are trying to sign a deal with Sierra on this one so it seems unlikely that we will get through 1991 without a non-computer version of Larry.

Sequels to arcade games strike me as being something of a curiosity but **Firehawk** is billed as **Thexder – The Second Encounter**. Four years after the events of **Thexder** the aliens are trying to invade earth again and players can fly their 'transforming battle suits' (does that sound familiar?) on ten bloodthirsty missions. This is another of the products that Sierra has licensed from Game Arts of Japan. Joystick wagglers can fly it for Christmas.

Two other sequels have been agreed but not finalised. Laura Bow, the girl detective in **The Colonel's Bequest** will be appearing in a second mystery game and Kristy Marks is designing another **Conquests Of** something. The conquering something may be on another Arthurian theme but other medieval legends are also being considered.

Is there anything apart from sequels in the pipeline? Why, yes, there is. **Oil's Well** is a VGA version of an old Sierra arcade game which is being redesigned by Banana Development. Banana are the people that released **Bananoid**, the beautiful but addictive bat and ball game, to the public domain last year. In **Oil's Well** you must drill your oil fields before corrupt competitors can sabotage you with land mines and pipe-eating critters! On completion of each level you get bizarre animated sequence featuring a dinosaur. I don't understand the significance of the dinosaur but he is pretty cute.

Get Mugged

So, Sierra plans a lot of remakes and sequels. Is it doing anything really new? Well, yes, it is. There is an entirely original computer game called **Keeping Up With Jones**. This is a game for four players (you have to pass the mouse from player to player) lightheartedly based on all those family board games where you deal with normal aspects of life. The only game of that type that is still published is Milton Bradley's **The Game Of Life** but Sierra has turned this into an unusual computer game with digitised live-action to give highly realistic animation on VGA screens. Players choose their goals and live normal American lives from school to the grave. Get a job, pay the bills, find somewhere to live, have a holiday, get mugged... it all sounds very jolly. It is available now in an MS-DOS version with Macintosh, Atari ST and Amiga to follow.

Jones (as it is abbreviated) was developed by Sierra staff from an independent idea. **Oil's Well** is being developed by Sierra staff in cooperation with an independent team. **Thexder** was licensed from another company. Will Sierra lose its corporate identity? I think that it is inevitable that Sierra will move away from the unified feel to its product line. This should increase the breadth of their appeal, and one way to capitalise on this would be to set up marketing groups with their own distinctive images within the company. It seems likely that a major step has already been taken in this direction.

All Mixed Up: Mother Goose

Some years ago, after the release of its rather unsuccessful **3-D Helicopter Simulator** Sierra bought a generalised flight simulator from Dynamix in Oregon. Sierra then found that it did not have sufficient staff to exploit this new development tool. With characteristic flair, Ken Williams solved the problem by buying Dynamix.

Dynamix had plans to bring out a fistful of games this year but this is out of line with the Sierra philosophy of bringing out just a few high quality products so Sierra has chopped the release schedule to just four games. And very tempting they sound.

Dynamix were already known and respected for a few games. Their first game was an arcade game called **Stellar 7** that was available on Apple microcomputers. It has been completely revamped and updated as one of the four new releases. The player commands Raven, an intergalactic war tank that fights aliens on seven different worlds in defence of Earth. The new VGA graphics and synthesiser sound track give this reworking of the old shoot-em-up a new lease of life.

The Dynamix game **A10 Tank Killer** was the flight simulator that so

Life Is A Game: Keeping Up With Jones

impressed Sierra originally. Now this expertise has been brought to bear on First World War aerial combat. **Red Baron** is a 3-D flight simulator using VGA graphics. The animation is pretty impressive but it is the attention to detail that is so remarkable. If you try night flying the stars are in correct configuration for 1914-18! You can fly into clouds and lose visibility. Fly too long into the sun and you will be blinded. Fly in bright sunlight and it glints off the wings. More importantly, your computer opponents fly and fight with a rare intelligence. This game is scheduled for an October release.

Interludes

The very first Dynamix game to be released under Sierra's control was **David Wolf: Secret Agent** which has only recently been available in the UK. This is another manifestation of the Dynamix flight simulation skills. In this case four simulations have been linked by visual interludes to tell an adventure spy thriller. It is a series of arcade games dressed as an adventure. The arcade sequences are good but it is the interludes that are significant in terms of the evolution of computer games. The interludes consist of digitised photographs of live actors with some rudimentary animation and speech bubbles to tell the story. The player can only interact with the game during the arcade sequences (which use much lower graphics resolution) but the graphics

CONFESSIONS OF A SIERRA JUNKIE

John Scott gives you a fix on the latest Amiga conversions

He shambled into the room, smelling of coffee and too many late nights. I'd seen it all before, a really together guy transformed into the sunken-eyed, unshaven mess standing before me, fingers still twitching at an invisible keyboard.

'Do you feel like talking now?'

Eventually he looked up. 'Yeah, I was just, like, wondering if I remembered to save the game before I pulled the plug on the computer.'

'And did you?'

'I'm sure I did,' he answered, looking utterly unsure. 'It's **The Colonel's Bequest**, he added, as if that explained everything.

He subsided into a chair, and our interview began:

STRATEGY PLUS: How did it all start?

SIERRA JUNKIE: Well, this nice man called Brian told me that Sierra games were being converted for the Amiga, and he offered me a free copy of **Space Quest III**, if I would write a review for him. I didn't see any harm in it so I said OK. It was a brilliant game, and not too difficult. I sat up night after night until I finished it.

SP: What came next?

SJ: Well... then he introduced me to the hard stuff. He sent me a copy of **Police Quest II**. You play the part of a detective who learns that a vicious criminal he helped put in jail has escaped, intending to take revenge. It's really exciting – you have to follow the correct police procedures to get through the game. You go around investigating crimes, interviewing people, and gathering evidence and leads. Your partner, Keith, goes round with you, but he tends to disappear when things get a bit rough.

You get to go scuba-diving, have shootouts, even foil a band of aircraft hijackers and dismantle their bomb. The graphics are good, and the music is just like you hear on one of those American cop shows. I just had to play until I finished it – but it nearly wasted me. In the game you have to make some phone calls, and you can only get the numbers from Directory Enquiries. If somebody hadn't told me that in America the number is 411, I'd still be sitting at the monitor.

SP: What happened after that?

SJ: **King's Quest IV – The Perils of Roselle**. You play the part of Princess Roselle. It's an odd kind of adventure – your father, the King, is dying and you have to go on a quest to save him. Some of the scenes in this game really brought back childhood memories – you get to meet the seven dwarfs, and kiss a frog, and lots of other nursery rhyme stuff. There are a lot of problems there that I still haven't solved, but I think that if I could only remember all the fairy tales I heard as a kid, things would be easier.

The graphics are every bit as good as the other Sierra games, and even better in some places. I got eaten by an ogre once, and dumped in a torture chamber another time, but for some reason that I can't quite define playing the game was quite relaxing – the whole thing has a nice gentle feel to it. Perhaps it's the feminine touch of Roberta Williams, the designer. Nice music too!

SP: I'm beginning to get the feeling that you have nothing bad to say about Sierra games at all. Am I right?

SJ: No way! I tried to get into **Manhunter II**, but that was a really bad trip. I still can't believe that a company like Sierra could produce it.

SP: What was wrong with it?

clearly point the direction for future games.

Dynamix have already developed a proprietary Games Development System which supports VGA graphics driven by a point and click interface – eliminating the typing to which so many potential adventurers object. The other two Dynamix games to be released this year use this new system. They are a combination of **David Wolf**-style arcade sequences and adventure-style puzzles.

In most adventure games you can see your character moving around the screen like an actor. This is the third person framework. **Rise Of The Dragon** is perceived from the first person, however. The screen shows the view that your character sees. Move close to another character and you will see them in close up. The genre is cyberpunk private eye. It has the feel of the *Blade Runner* movie as you move through a violent city of the future trying to solve a dangerous mystery.

Heart Of China is a 1930s action adventure in which our hero must rescue a kidnap victim and travel across the world. The use of scanned airbrush pictures has created scenes as lavish as the backgrounds to old Disney cartoons. This is pulp fiction writ large. Furthermore the viewpoint switches between the three major characters so it takes another step closer to the interactive movies concept. Like **Rise Of The Dragon** the game should be available on MS-DOS machines by Christmas.

As I wrote this article I was aware that my enthusiasm for past Sierra games could lead me to write little more than a sales brochure for the company. If you feel that this is what you have got then I can only assure you that my enthusiasm for the games is quite genuine and that as this piece developed I was increasingly aware that I want these games and I want them NOW!

PS I'd like a Rolls Royce too. SP

Confessions, continued

SJ: Ha! It would be shorter to say what was right! The scenario sounded really good – a dark future, where Earth has been overcome by Aliens, and you start out working for them, hunting your own people. All humans have been given implanted homing devices, and you have a computer which can track their movements all round the city. You can follow the movements of your suspect and everyone they meet. It really sounded like fun!

SP: What went wrong?

SJ: I'll tell you. The graphics were way below Sierra's usual standards. I've heard better music and sound effects coming from a ZX Spectrum! I could have put up with that for the sake of a good adventure, but the worst thing of all, the really lethal thing about the game, is that it's a thinly disguised collection of arcade games! If you can't beat them you're stuck. You're supposed to be able to set the level to 'easy' but even on the easiest level I couldn't get past one of the games – and neither could a friend who's an arcade hot-shot. When I get stuck on an adventure, I want it to be because of a problem that I can solve with my head! But the game won't even appeal to arcade freaks, because the games are so *bad*. I've played more addictive games on a ZX81 (remember them?).

SP: But this didn't cure you of your addiction to Sierra games?

SJ: Nearly – but then I discovered **Conquests of Camelot**. Needless to say, it's the quest for the Holy Grail, but the designer obviously loves the Arthur tales, and has dug right into the roots of the stories, into the pre-Christian legends. It's funny in places; annoy Merlin enough and he'll turn you into a dog for a while, but the tragic side of the Arthur cycle comes out too. I'm a bit of a grail freak myself, and I reckon that this game gets closer to the real thing than any other I've seen.

Graphics and sound are great, and even the arcade-type battle with the Saracen is well done. I love this game, and it's one of those that come with goodies in the box. A nice map of Europe and the Middle East, circa 800AD, and a pretty book of words called the LIBER EX DOCTRINA.

SP: So what are you playing at present?

SJ: **The Colonel's Bequest**. It's really different. It's set in the 1920s, and this old guy calls all his relations together at his mansion in the deep South. When he announces that he's going to leave them his millions, terminal greed sets in, and a murderer strikes. You have to investigate and discover the murderer while staying alive yourself. When I first played this, I thought: 'But nothing's happening!', and it does look that way at first. You could be tempted to think that there's no game to the game at all. However the blurb on the box says 'Never before has a plot been so complex or characters so well developed'. I'm beginning to believe it! There's lots to this game, but your heroine (another one) will have to search, talk, and listen to discover it. Just one grumble about this game. In general, Sierra games take a while before changing from one scene to the next – you get used to that after a while, and it's no great hardship. But **Bequest** is so S-L-O-W to switch screens that it does get a bit tedious after a while. Still, good game. Watch out for the chandelier!

SP: So where do you go from here?

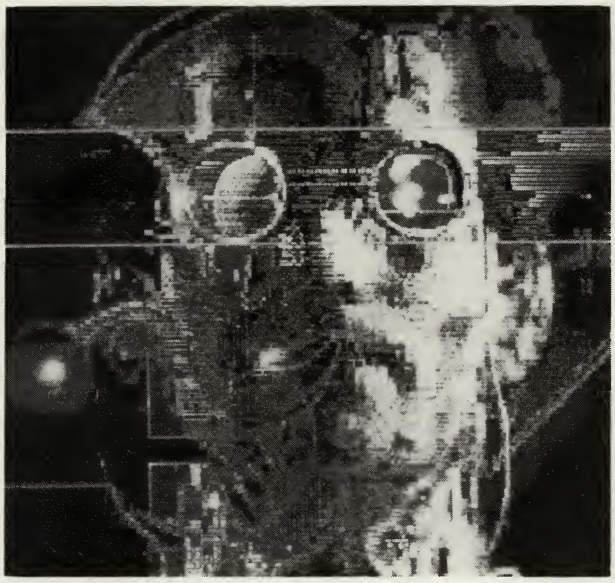
SJ: I want to try **Hero's Quest**. You can actually generate your own character and take him through the adventure. Well... if that's all, I'd really like to get back to **Colonel's Bequest**...

He unfolded himself from the chair and wandered out, intent on finding a murderer. Actually, I quite like the sound of that game myself. Perhaps just one game won't do any harm... SP

NEUROMANCER

Are you feeling lucky, cyberpunk?

by Steven Williams



WHAT is Cyberspace? 'A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators... unthinkable complexity... lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind...'

Apart from being a pretty accurate description of the Northern Line, the well chosen excerpts from the best known cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*, by William Gibson, quickly help to dispel the idea that you are about to play yet another 'hunt-for-the-blue-mouse-to-scare-the-green elephant type of game, a genre that sends me screaming from the room faster than ten minutes of *Stars In. Their Eyes.*

Put simply, cyberspace (or the 'matrix') is a three dimensional representation of the vast sea of computer data that exists in the computer world, connecting systems run by big businesses, the military, government and other unnervingly large and liberty-threatening multinational corporations. By employing a 'deck' interface, this seething mass of data is converted into a consistent 'world' where computer systems take on geometric shapes and sit, rather like conventional buildings, on a vast grid-like plain that extends into infinity.

By accessing cyberspace via your deck you are free to roam through this alternative world and attempt to 'enter' bases to unearth their secrets. Imagine being able to assassinate your phone bill, or even discover the bastards who put you on that junk mail listing for the rest of the century.

Naturally, with so much to protect and so many cyberpunks rampaging through cyberspace, most of the bases are extensively protected by specially written guard programs. Acting rather like those ticket barriers you find on the Northern line – and almost as life-threatening – Intrusion Countermeasure Electronics (ICE) bar entry to most bases and need to be destroyed, confused or duped into letting you through.

For those corporations who have enough money to spend and enough secrets to protect, the ultimate guard programs –AIs – are super intelligent entities capable of frying cyberpunks' brains faster than you can microwave a pizza. Their power is so great that their paranoid owners forbid AIs to communicate with each other, in case they all decide that protecting their masters' information is slightly less interesting than, for instance, world domination.

Nightmare

With such an interesting premise to work on, Troy Miles and his team have developed an interactive graphic adventure with the challenge and realism more commonly associated with text based games. Your character begins life in the 'Real World' of 2058. The city is Chiba, a nightmare of crime, technology and high tech black marketing. Imagine your local chain of Dixons, replace the shop assistants with police officers from *Blade Runner,* and move the whole thing into Bangkok and you have a fairly accurate representation of what life is like in the city. Money gets you everywhere, and in order to venture into cyberspace you must first piece together the necessary skills, software and hardware, as well as buying Comlink time (rather like a conventional phone card).

The shops, bars and hardware stores are populated with an interesting collection of characters, rather than little old men (or 'plot pokers' as we games writers call them). Conversation is slightly limited, since you must prompt the character to talk, then choose your reply from a series of lines flashed up before you. In practice, however, this works quite convincingly, and helps to maintain the pace of the game instead of getting you bogged down learning syntax.

The game really takes off when you gain access to Pax, a futuristic public terminal system that links into the City News Service, Personal Banking System and Bulletin Board which enables you to contact other cyberpunks and pick up information about the mysterious disappearances of a number of your cyberpunk friends. The bulletin board is constantly updated, and allows you to leave messages as well as read them.

Touches like this really add to the game's realism, since, unlike the fantasy based epics that pour megabytes into atmospheric graphics that most people ignore, **Neuromancer** exploits the computer's capabilities to offer a credible and absorbing adventure.

At this stage of the review most writers would start dropping hints about the action, or boast manfully how quickly they cracked it. Since I've managed to get nowhere very slowly, I'll cut this review short and get back to the serious business of hacking into cyberspace. SP

Designed by
Troy Miles

Published by
Electroniuc Arts

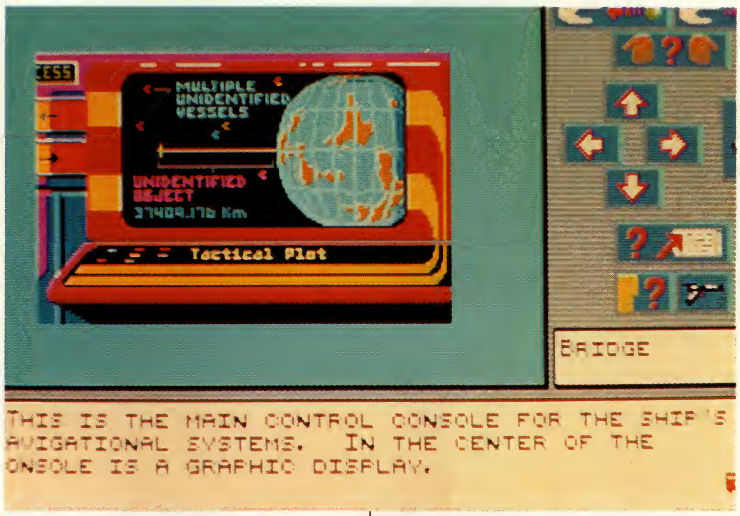
Price £24.99

Available for the PC and Amiga
Reviewed on the Amiga

UNIVERSE III

A World Apart

by John Scott


MULTIPLE UNIDENTIFIED VESSELS
UNIDENTIFIED OBJECT
Tactical Plot
BRIDGE
THIS IS THE MAIN CONTROL CONSOLE FOR THE SHIP'S NAVIGATIONAL SYSTEMS. IN THE CENTER OF THE CONSOLE IS A GRAPHIC DISPLAY.

AS THE title suggests, this is the third in a science fiction trilogy. Although the box-cover blurb is quick to point out that no previous **Universe** experience is required, two pages of the rather flimsy manual are devoted to explaining the story so far.

This background details the discovery of the hyperspace drive, the subsequent period of interstellar war and piracy (known as the Great Panic), and finally brings the player to the current scenario – the attempt to establish diplomatic relations with Tau Ceti III. It all sounds easy enough...

Safe Cracker

The game begins with the captain lounging around his starship quarters. Once you can figure out how to open your safe – the method described in the manual does not work – you will discover that it will not be plain sailing. Your orders and the other documents in the safe give the first clues that all is not well on board your ship.

You will soon discover that dissident members within the diplomatic entourage have vested interests in ensuring that the mission does not succeed. You will also find that the population of Tau Ceti III is far from friendly. As if that wasn't interesting enough, you have also been entrusted with secret documents about using the hyperspace booster as a super weapon, and this information is only to be given to the Tau Cetians after the success (ha!) of the diplomatic mission.

Icons

Graphics are adequate, but uninspiring, and the screen display is fairly simple: the left of the screen shows an overhead view of the character and his current surroundings, while to the right is a display of command icons enabling him to move; pick up and drop items; check status, such as health, accuracy, moves taken so far and marks out of 100; fire a weapon; or choose from a simple list of verbs.

Hardened adventurers will cringe to learn that there are only 13 verbs in this list! This is the first of a number of problems with the game. Perhaps the designers wanted to avoid having to use a parser to handle typed commands, but the restrictive verb list is more frustrating than even the stupidest of parsers.

Incredibly, the list of verbs does not include the word 'use', and when you select a verb such as 'give' or 'put', the computer imposes severe limitations on which objects can be used with that verb. This is not good for the temper of the player, and also has the side effect of making many of the puzzles easier than they ought to be. If you are laden down with objects, choose the word 'put', and the machine only allows you to 'put' one specific item, then it's a fair bet that you've got the problem solved.

Ingredients

The one great strength of **Universe III** is its strong plot and story line. The best adventures can be rewritten as novels, and this game has all the plot ingredients that any author could wish for. But that is where the good points end.

Although it was encouraging to find only a 15-page booklet in the box, the instructions do not begin until page eight. At least one of the 'getting started' instructions does not work, and information on some of the other commands was brief to the point of obscurity. Despite the claim that no previous experience was necessary, the game would make more sense to someone who had played **Universe I** or **II**. Interestingly enough, an advert for these games on the final page of the manual informs us that they come with a 105-page and a 115-page manual respectively.

If **Universe III** was one of those cheapo, budget games which are at last appearing for 16-bit machines, it would have been easy to dismiss it with: 'Oh well, you pays your money and you takes your chances.' Anyone who paid full price for the game, however, would probably feel ripped off. It is a super concept that is ruined by bad implementation. Nice idea, shame about the game. SP

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Designed by William Leslie III

Published by Impressions/Omnitrend

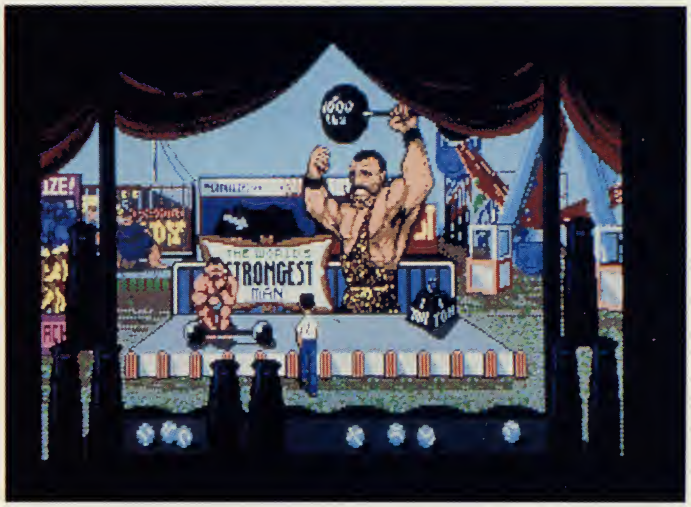
Price £24.99

Available for PC, ST and Amiga Reviewed on the Amiga

SEARCH FOR THE KING

A-wop-bop-a-lula...

by Theo Clarke



LIVING on the air in Cincinnati. Cincinnati WKRP' Can you sing the tune? Did you find that the main attraction of Leisure Suit Larry was the sexual innuendo? Do you find most graphic adventures too easy? If you answered yes to all three questions don't bother to read this review; just go out and buy **Search For The King**.

Presumably quite a few readers remain. Certainly few people admitted to liking the *WKRP in Cincinnati* television show all those years ago. Assume, for now, that you could come to love a story about a Video Technician whose boss cannot even remember his name. Substitute WILL New York, Les Manley and Stella for WKRP Cincinnati, Les Nessman and Jennifer, and you have the basis for the very first adventure game from Accolade. The similarity has to be intentional: Manley's boss actually calls him Ness when he asks for a raise.

Tabloid

The game opens with an animated sequence in which the TV station announces that the first person to find 'The King' will win a million dollars. Now you, I and the WILL directors know that the King of Rock and Roll is dead and that the rumoured sightings are marketing ploys for tabloid newspapers. We know that the prize will never be won. Les Manley disagrees. He decides to find 'The King' in his lunchtime and make the bosses pay. Les's search takes him from New York to Las Vegas and on to the home of the King where he impersonates Elvis (oops, I mean The King) so convincingly that he is trampled to death by an adoring crowd. In heaven he meets the King in person and his photo of Elvis (oops, I've done it again) with an angelic band is sufficient proof to win the prize.

You are Les Manley. Les is used to living in an animated world with high resolution graphics but you may be impressed. Over the past year adventure games have made huge advances in the quality of their user interfaces. We now have very high resolution graphics with slick animation in which figures reflect the scale of their surroundings. Designers are overcoming the limitations of early parsers by the use of point-and-click mouse-driven interfaces and by writing better parsers. Accolade are very proud of the parser in **Search For The King**. It is clear that they consider it to be a major advance.

Cheeky

The parser is largely the work of Michael Berlyn. He is one of the many remarkable talents to emerge from the Infocom stable and he is now the lead designer of Accolade's next adventure game, **Altered Destiny**. The graphics owe their high quality to the work of Steve Cartwright, late of Activision. Between them Berlyn and Cartwright have led a team that has created an Adventure Programming Engine (APE) which is so sophisticated that they feel that they can poke fun at Sierra in the game itself. Another cheeky reference to the limitations of other parsers is the sequence 'Sorry, I don't know the word fountain... no, just kidding' when the player first looks at a water cooler.

The jokes are funny but the parser is not as far ahead of the competition as the designers' attitude suggests. It may well be archaic to rely on the generic verb 'Use' but programmers who work in glass houses should be careful to ensure that simple constructions like 'Ask Bobbi to show scarf' can be handled by their own parser.

The parser does not recognise common objects if they have a specific use somewhere in the game. It is disconcerting to find that looking at Susie's eyes (because she has just winked at Les) yields the information that the eyes are not here simply because a gypsy's eyes were described in detail earlier in the game. It is even more disconcerting to receive apparently unrelated advice in these circumstances. Upon looking at Susie's mouth the player is told that the bear's mouth is not here!

Absurdities of this kind are an established feature of adventure game parsers but they are not what one expects of a parser that crows about its versatility.

These features are not bugs in the

Designed by
Steve Cartwright & Michael Berlyn

Published by
Accolade

Price £29.99

Available for PC and Amiga
Reviewed on PC

CGA, EGA, VGA/16, MCGA

Soundblaster, AdLib, Roland and CMS soundboards supported

parser. They are limitations. Likewise, the absurdly intolerant exits from individual scenes cannot be blamed upon APE itself. The fact that the Les Manley figure must be very precisely placed to move through some doorways is a problem with the designer's use of the Engine. When Les approaches an open door it seems reasonable to expect him to pass through any point which would not cause his shoulders to hit the door jamb. Sadly this expectation is repeatedly frustrated.

This is not to say that there are no bugs in APE. How can Les walk on air? Just use a mouse to point at the wall outside his boss's office; Les will then ascend an invisible mound. Type 'up' while Les is in the kitchen and he will appear inside the structure of the bed in the bedroom above. He can then be made to walk through solid objects by use of the cursor keys. Surely characters should not become ethereal and walk out of the screen with such ease.

Pixelation

The graphics are another aspect that shows no great technical advantage over other manufacturer's games. The images are well designed and the animation is competent but 16 colour VGA is not a significant improvement upon 16 colour EGA. If pre-release copies of Sierra/Dynamix 256 colour VGA games are any guide it is clear that 16 colour VGA will soon look prehistoric. In the animated sequences the pixelation is quite coarse. Worse than that, it is slow.

A sequence where Les makes a sandwich was painfully slow even when the game was running on a 20 MHz IBM PS/2. Slow animation of this sort is made doubly irritating when, as in this case, there is no means of skipping the animation.

'But what of the game itself?' a few non-technical souls may be asking. The game is fun. The essence of the story is heavily influenced by the adventures of the casually attired Mr Laffer but there are many unique touches. The mood and the point of view varies and the characters have distinctive personalities which are not solely derived from caricatures. However, the puzzles are very hard in some cases and the solutions are not always logical. Fortunately most of the key items are easily identified because they have illustrated windows that pop up when you look at them. These 'windowed' items can be carried by Les although it is not always easy to take them.

Most illogical problems can be resolved by methodically looking at everything, taking the windowed items and giving them to all the characters until a favourable result is achieved. A tangible dream may seem like a surreal concept to you but such foibles are acceptable tricks on the part of the designer, particularly when verbal clues are available.

The unforgivable failing of **Search For The King** is an illogical puzzle that is not adequately clued and is downright obscure. It is not right that a player should need to use a hint book or peer into the data files to find puzzle solutions that are essential for completion of the game. In order to 'win' this game, Les must have a resurrection card at the point that he is trampled to death. The resurrection card is only available in the very earliest stages of the game. Even when you know the solution it will take almost an hour to reload a file saved at the crucial point and wade back through the instructions to the very last command of the game. It is at this point that one becomes aware of the importance of being able to skip animated screens.

Many of the solutions are entertaining, even if they are absurd. It would take a very dour player to find no laughs in the course of the game . . . and even such a player will find incidents to smile at! It is unfortunate that Cartwright does not display Al (**Leisure Suit Larry**) Lowe's light touch when it comes to sexual humour but the overall tone is harmless.

It must be emphasised that the package has many strengths. The software takes up little more than 1.5MB of disk space so it can easily be played from floppy disks (albeit slowly). The routine to install the game on a hard disk is clear, versatile and efficient. The game does require over 500K of available RAM to execute, however, and some users will have to unload other software to run the game.

The user manual is a model of its kind. The instructions are presented in a lucidly droll style that will not become irritating with repeated reference.

The score deserves a favourable mention, too. Inevitably the raw PC speaker sound is banal and uninspiring but the MIDI score is varied and catchy without being intrusive. It is slightly disappointing that there are no sound effects and no aural salute when points are scored but the range of melodies came as a surprise (in view of the compact data files).

Sadly there are only a few flaws that prevent this Accolade adventure from being the success it deserves: trivial bugs, a game sequence that will involve tiresome repetition in arriving at the solution, and a penchant for charmless innuendo. SP

WE LIKE...

1
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Sierra (PC & Amiga)

2
Conquests of Camelot
Sierra (PC & Amiga)

3
Curse of the Azure Bonds
SSI (PC)

4
It Came From The Desert/Antheads
Cinemaware (Amiga)

5
Ultima VI
Mindscape (PC & ST)

LOOM

Going For A Song

by Theo Clarke

THERE is an enchanting, fantastic world to be discovered in **Loom**. It is an involving background with a depth that is enough to make a player care about the computer adventure sprite he controls.

On a fantasy world where each guild of craftsmen forms a complete, discrete community, the weavers have learned to manipulate the fabric of space and time. Their use of magic, however, aroused fear in the people, and after a period of persecution the weavers withdrew from the world of men to a remote island which they named Loom.

Interbred

The weavers' withdrawal was so complete that they have interbred to the point of sterility and only a few of them survive. Seventeen years ago Lady Cygna wove a spell on the great loom that is the focal point of the weavers' religion. Bobbin Threadbare was born of that spell, but the elders of the guild punished Cygna for the chaos that she had introduced into the pattern: she was transformed into a swan and banished from the island.

Bobbin was then brought up by the elderly Dame Hetchel who has taught him some of the guild's secrets despite the strictures of the elders. Every year, on Bobbin's birthda,y a swan flies over Loom, and Hetchel has ensured that Bobbin always sees this.

This year Bobbin is 17 and he has asked to watch the swan's flight alone. He starts the game asleep at the foot of a tree on a hilltop above the weavers' village. Dawn is breaking.

This is explained in a half-hour audio drama on a cassette tape that accompanies the game. Apart from the software disks, the box contains a machine-specific reference card specific, a brief manual and the book of patterns. The illustrated book of patterns lists 29 spells – the weavers call them drafts – with a brief description of each and space to write in the four notes, or threads, of the spell when it is learned.

Bobbin is woken by a magical summons to attend the elders. The player must take him to the council where he overhears them discussing his banishment. The elders punish Hetchel for teaching Bobbin by turning her into an egg, but before they can work the same trick on Bobbin, a swan invades the chamber, invokes the spell of transcendence and turns all of the weavers into swans. Bobbin is unaffected and is left beside the great loom with the egg and the magic staff of one of the elders.

Transcendental

A musical stave sits at the base of the screen while Bobbin holds the staff. The stave shows the C major scale – the eight notes C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C – but only the first three notes are highlighted at the start of the game. A draft is woven by playing the four notes: this can be achieved by typing the required letters or by pointing at the stave.

If a draft is attempted that contains a note which is not highlighted, the player is advised that the draft is too high for Bobbin. So, although Bobbin starts the adventure knowing the drafts of opening and transcendence, the latter is beyond his initial abilities.

Loom is the story of Bobbin's search for his lost guild and his consequent involvement in the war against the chaos that is spreading across the pattern. As the tale unfolds, he learns new spells and increases the range of notes that he can use.

Brian Moriarty, designer of **Loom**, was one of the small team of programmers involved in the formation of Infocom to launch its mainframe games on microcomputers. Infocom's games had sophisticated parsers – the part of the program that tries to make sense of the instructions typed in by the player – that understood normal English sentences. The Infocom philosophy was that the mechanics should not impede the play. Moriarty now works for Lucasfilm and that company's games use the same philosophy.

With the quality of graphics currently available there is no need for textual descriptions of scenes. Similarly, the use of mouse-driven, point and click methods of interacting with games addresses gamers' increasing antagonism towards typing.

Loom reflects these views. The graphics are beautiful and the anima-

Designed by
Brian Moriarty

Published by
Lucasfilm Games/US Gold

Price £29.99

Available for PC, Atari ST and Amiga
Reviewed on PC

tion is smooth. When the player clicks on the point to which he wants Bobbin to move, the character's figure grows or diminishes to maintain consistency with the perspective of his surroundings.

Perspective

Most of the scenes scroll smoothly from one to another. Moving the mouse pointer near any significant item brings up a small icon of that item in the corner of the screen. Clicking on that item produces a brief note which gives further details about it or initiates an animated sequence associated with it. Clicking on Hetchel's book of patterns, for instance, causes Bobbin to take the book, whereas clicking on the closed clam merely tells the player that it is closed as tight as a clam!

Sometimes a draft is heard when an item is clicked on. These sequences of notes can then be attempted by Bobbin. The nature of the associated spell is not always obvious but the links are logical. In some cases the spell can be deduced from its source; in others there is a clue in the book of patterns. As a last resort it is possible to cast the spell on something. While an icon is displayed it is possible to cast a spell on that item, but not all drafts work on all items.

Aural Delight

It is clearly apparent that there is a strong melodic element to the game. It is not necessary to have any musical aptitude to play: each note that is played appears as a flash on the magic staff and is highlighted briefly on the stave in the normal mode of play. There are two other modes available. In practise mode, any draft that the player hears is recorded so that it can be played back immediately. In expert mode there are no visual aids and the game must be played by ear. It must be said that the game is an aural delight.

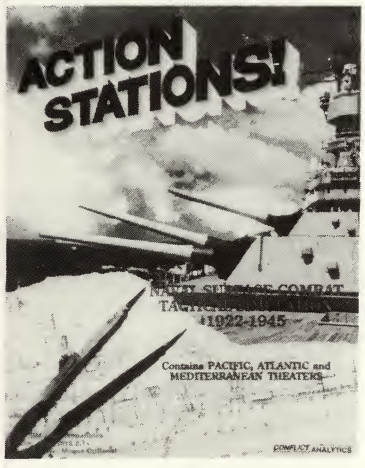
Even through the notoriously rudimentary PC speaker the music is remarkable. The sound through an AdLib sound card, however, was inevitably a powerful, evocative score. The game supports AdLib and CMS sound cards but Roland owners have to ask for a separate disk which supports their MT-32 or LAPC-1 card.

Bobbin's adventure is charming and the game contains a gentle humour. There is an aura of mild surprise about Bobbin as he encounters all manner of strange beings. He appears to walk the narrow line between cuteness and camp without falling into either trap.

Loom, however, is more an interactive story than an adventure game. Bobbin can never be killed or trapped by any of the player's actions, so any puzzle can be resolved by clicking on all of the available items and running through all of known drafts until the desired outcome is achieved.

Many people might consider this to be a fatal flaw in the product and anybody who spends £30 on **Loom** expecting to get a Sierra-style adventure with better sound and graphics is likely to feel cheated. But anyone who regards it as a long, interactive video is in for a rare treat.

The game is sufficiently unusual that it can be recommended that most people should take a look at it. The story is absorbing and exciting, and there is plenty of pleasure to be gained from encounters and from discovering the effects of the various spells. SP



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SECRET OF THE SILVER BLADES

AD&D Forgotten Realms Adventure

by Jamie Thomson

SECRET of the Silver Blades is the third in SSI's *Forgotten Realms* **AD&D** computer role-playing series: the first two were **Pool of Radiance** and **Curse of the Azure Bonds**. It is not a direct follow-on in terms of plot, but requires the same levels of the characters – about eight to 11. This will mean something to anyone who is familiar with **D&D** – to everyone else, it means that more and tougher monsters are encountered, and that more stuff can be thrown at them.

Installation to hard disk or making back-ups of **Secret of the Silver Blades** was much easier than it was for previous titles in the series. SSI scores well here on a low number of disks and a short waiting time before gamestart – a definite improvement.

It was hellishly difficult, however, to transfer characters from **Curse of the Azure Bonds**. The booklet simply does not describe how you go about it, which is a surprising omission because SSI is usually quite thorough. In the end it proved possible by finding and transferring the right character files from a save game sub-directory to the **Secret** directory – all very clumsy. As it was the transferred characters were slightly too high a level which resulted in easy, boring battles at the beginning. It is not worth transferring any characters above ninth level.

User Friendly

The game system is the same as that of the other games in the series and that of SSI's *DragonLance* series. It is an excellent rendition of **Advanced Dungeons & Dragons** to a computer format, using a menu system – both in terms of the rule system and in making it as user friendly as an unwieldy game like **D&D** could be on a computer. **Secret**, however, is not quite up to the standards of previous games in the series; depositing cash and equipping or transferring items between character is rather tedious.

There is a choice of most **D&D** character classes: cleric, magic-user, thief, paladin, fighter and ranger. A party can consist of up to six characters with two slots for non-player character hirelings. Selecting a character brings up a menu to find out his statistics, such as strength and dexterity, the items owned, money (in gold or platinum pieces) and status: OK, unconscious, dead and (my favourite) stoned – turned to stone, that is! Rangers now have druidic spells.

Secret gets into the realms of some of the higher level spells and some of the deadliest **D&D** monsters. Spell descriptions, however, are not nearly as clear as those of previous games: effects and ranges or diameters, for example, are not explained.

Dexterity

Combats follow the on-screen tactical battle-map mode of computer role-playing games, with characters and monsters moving and acting in turn, based on dexterity. The map is divided into squares (not marked on screen) for movement and combat, with a character or monster icon filling one square. A number of commands – move, attack, cast spell, use item and so on – can be input when it is a character's turn. Graphics are all right, and a character's icon can be modified quite comprehensively, including what weapon he carries, what clothes, what colours and even whether he (or she, for dwarfs) has a beard.

Movement in the dungeon or city uses a 3-D view in a section of the screen, showing walls, doors, arches and so on. The effect is not bad graphically, with varying 'wall-types' according to which dungeon the characters are in. Anyone familiar with **AD&D** will have no trouble getting into the game – others will have to read a well-written rule book that explains things clearly. Unfortunately, it is **AD&D**, so be ready for some of the illogical vagaries of the game.

The plot itself is rather confusing. The characters arrive naked, with no equipment, in the mining town of New Verdigris. The miners have uncovered the old 'Ancient Evil' number. Some villains – the old Black Circle – seek to release the Dreadlord, who sleeps in his castle buried in a glacier. The objective of the game is not as clear as it could be. There is too much information, introduced too early.

The first dungeon does not help: games such as **Curse of the Azure Bonds** and **Champions of Krynn** had well-structured plots and well-designed underworlds, combining just the right amount of exploration and unravelling with the minimum of tedious dungeon-mapping.

Underworlds

Secret of the Silver Blades starts with a sprawling cave complex (with a partial map provided, at least) that requires hours of aimless mapping before some plot elements surface. Tedious random encounters involving the same limited range of monsters become a bind rather than a bit of fun. 'Either way, explore the largest 3-D adventuring expanse ever in an **AD&D** computer game,' it says on the back of the box. When are designers of computer role-playing games going to realise that mapping large underworlds is the most boring, off-putting and soul-destroying aspect of this genre?

Once the first section is out of the way the game plays well – eventually the plot becomes more manageable and there are some good encounter sequences to be uncovered.

As a series, these **AD&D** games represent good value for money in terms of hours played. The game is a must for anyone who likes **AD&D**. Anyone else should try **Champions of Krynn** first for a test run – still pretty good as a straight computer role-playing game.

Secret of the Silver Blades is a slight disappointment as a follow up to **Curse of the Azure Bonds**, despite the higher level of play – it feels slightly hurried. It is worth getting, however, if the other games in the series have proved enjoyable. SP

Designed by
Westwood AssociaStes

Published by
SI/US Gold

Price £29.99

Available for PC

CGA, EGA

Requires 512K (640K for Tandy 16 colour), hard drive or two floppies.

CIRCUIT'S EDGE

Beyond the Fringe

by Jon Woodall

You are Marid Audran: Private Investigator, alcoholic and sometime junkie. You live in the Budayeen – the crime sector of an Islamic city. It's the start of the 23rd century – an era and place ideally suited to your lifestyle. Anything (and almost anyone) can be bought and indulgence in any vice is easy. Decadence is the accepted way of life and, the occasional bit of PI work to bring in the Kiams (the local currency) aside, life is one big party.

Circuit's Edge is based around a setting and characters from George Alec Effinger's books *When Gravity Fails*, *A Fire In The Sun* and *The Exile Kiss*.

Godfather

As Marid you are lucky enough to have a protector in the form of 'Papa' Friedlander Bey who is effectively the Godfather of the Budayeen (and the rest of the city). His word is law and, so long as you stay on his good side, you hardly have to worry about little things like the law or the police. When he asks you for a small favour – to collect a notebook for him – you naturally do it for him. It's a pity that when you get to the address you were given the person you were to meet is dead and the notebook missing. Then the police arrest you, take the evidence you found and things look grim. Papa gets you released without any problem but you've still got to get the notebook for him: from then on difficulties and bodies seem to increase in frequency.

At 5 foot 9 and 150 pounds you hardly look like Superman but first impressions can be misleading. This is the 23rd Century and as well as the fairly common Moddy and Daddy sockets you have a special Daddy allowing you to ignore fear, fatigue, hunger, thirst and pain. Moddies & Daddies are chips which plug into a socket on your head allowing you to gain skills and knowledge which you wouldn't otherwise have. Moddies have greater effect than Daddies – you take on some small aspects of another personality (either real or fictional) as well as the skills whereas Daddies tend to give you skills in a fairly small area of competency. You can have one Moddy and three Daddies plugged in at any time.

The game starts in your apartment – it is only here that the game can be saved (only one position can be saved at a time). Most of the action takes place within the Budayeen which is a fairly small area (sixteen blocks wide). There are none of the common problems of mapping as a map is provided showing your location at all times as well as a three-dimensional view of the scene ahead of you. You can call up a map of the whole Budayeen at any time and, once you've worked out how to find your way around, geography is easy and mapping unnecessary. The emphasis of the game is on solving problems and interacting with the other characters which is how adventure games should be.

The graphics are good, though not outstanding, and I found the view ahead to be a bit too colourful – almost gaudy. The text is lengthy and well written but it is here that what I found to be the most annoying feature of the game crops up: the text is too large, so few of the messages will fit in the text window in one go.

You move using the cursor keys and perform all other actions via pull-down windows. I was concerned at first that this lack of free-text entry would greatly limit choice of actions, but the options available cover just about everything.

When you talk to a character you are given a choice of things to say to them; the composition of this list depends upon the individual in question and the circumstances. You can also ask a character about an item, place, person or topic – you type in what you want them to tell you about. It is here that the dossier on the main characters is of use – read it carefully and you will get some useful information on who to ask about what.

All Moddy Cons

Combat plays a significant part in the game and it is advisable to have a useful Moddy and/or Daddies plugged in before engaging in it. You will have to work out the exact abilities gained from the various chips rom experience but watch out for side effects as well as the main benefits.

Circuit's Edge has largely managed to avoid the linear feel of many games – you can get to your objective in many ways. You normally have a number of leads to follow up and there's no correct order in which to deal with them in many cases. This allows you to try the game from different approaches.

Attention has been paid to detail in the writing of the game and a similar approach would be profitable when playing it. I found that making notes as I went along was of great benefit: an option exists to replay the last 50 significant events which happened to you but as you have to do this in reverse chronological order it can be tedious. If one lead seems to be a dead end then try another: even if you don't get anywhere with what you are pursuing then often something else will happen, giving you a new direction to head in.

In conclusion, the game is well designed, challenging to play and good fun. However, some of the scenes of violence would perhaps be too detailed for some people's taste and I wouldn't recommend this game as a present for a child. SP

Designed by
Michael Legg, Michael Moore and George Alec Effinger

Published by
Infocom/Activision

Price £34.99

Available on the PC

CGA, EGA

Roland and AdLib soundboards supported

TV Sports Blackout

Strike out: TV Sports Baseball

According to reports from the US, **TV Sports Baseball,** the hugely successful follow up to similarly prefixed 'Football' and 'Basketball' has been nixed. Beyond Software Inc, a small San Francisco software house, had been contracted to produce the game for Cinemaware which unexpectedly cancelled the project in May. Cinemaware is, however, claiming the rights to the program and is trying to thwart Beyond's plans to sell it elsewhere. Inevitably, m'learned friends have been called in. Some consolation for 'TV Sports' fans is at hand, though: Cinemaware is expected to release an ice hockey game next year.

BITS

■ **If you can't wait for their UK release, two new Harpoon expansion kits are available on import from Strategic Plus (081-941 6163). Harpoon Editor and North Atlantic Convoy (Battleset 2) are now being, er, shipped.**

■ **Robin Smith's International Cricket will be released on the Challenge label – in December!**

■ **Commodore CD-TV, whose launch at the Computer Entertainment Show was postponed, is now expected to be available in mid-October.**

■ **Channel 4 is to show a new series based on computer gaming, provisionally titled The UK Computer Championship. It is anticipated that the programme will cover shoot em ups, sports/simulations and 'oddballs', though at the moment the exact format has still to be decided. No date has yet been fixed for broadcast.**

Electric

New releases from Electronic Arts include **Fountain of Dreams**, a role-playing game *(what isn't these days? – Ed)* set in the science fiction world of post nuclear Birmingham. Sorry, Florida. Crime, voodoo, mutants, and killer clowns(!), all figure in this radiation packed PC adventure.

Battle Chess II should be available by the time you read this. **BC2** is the follow up to you-know-what. Like its predecessor this is based on Chinese Chess and features exotic animations. No more staring at the time clock, what you get here is '2-D and 3-D viewing modes'. Online information is also available to help explain the rules and strategy. Confirmation that we are living in a world of sequels comes with the news (2) that **Bard's Tale III: Thief of Fate** is on its way. Characters from **Bard's Tale** I and II can be beamed across.

Trekking back in time we find ourselves in Middle Earth, maaan. This is the site, of course, of **Lord of the Rings**, the book that inspired some of the worst music ever pressed on vinyl. This new software version is volume 1 of 3 and has been programmed by Interplay (which created the aforementioned **Bard's Tale**). Seven maps, digitised sound, and graphics that should make Gandalf check what's in his tea. Available on the PC and its sequels.

Red storm blitzkrieg

Wargamers who are feeling a bit neglected will be thrilled to hear that two new simulations will be released next month on the PC and Amiga.

White Death and **Blitzkrieg in the Ardennes** have been available for some time in the US where they received very favourable reviews. **White Death** is a conversion of the GDW board game which simulated combat on the Russian front, while **Blitzkrieg** covers, obviously enough, the battle of the Ardennes.

Both these games, as well as **Action Stations!** (reviewed this issue) are distributed in the UK by Storm Computers on their Internecine label.

Micro travel

Following the success of **Midwinter** on Rainbird, Microprose is to release **Betrayal** on the same label. The story, we are told, is one of medieval strife. 'Sound financial management of your lands, and political subterfuge will be the skills required of you'. On all formats. Paragon Software has developed GDW's **Megatraveller** (a *genuine* role playing system) series for computer. The first release will be **The Zhodani Conspiracy**, and will be marketed through Microprose, expected anytime now on the PC. On the Microprose label itself watch out for **UMS II** and **Silent Service II**. Full review of at least one of these games next month.

Accolades

Ever wondered what it would be like should you, by chance, be sucked through the screen of your TV set? Now you can find out in Accolade's **Altered Destiny**, for this is the fate of P J Barret, star of this new adventure game. PC version in November. Also from Accolade comes **Star Control**, a one or two player tactical space combat game due the end of this month.

Digits

Digital Integration, which likes to bill itself as 'the thinking man's software label' are to release **ATF II**. Yes, we wondered what it meant too. In fact it stands for Advanced Tactical Fighter II which is based on the next generation USAF stealth fighter. The player's objective is to assist allied forces and prevent global domination by the enemy(?). You can save the world on all formats next month.

Sierra Britannia?

Following a recent court case in America in which Activision was successfully sued for a sum not unadjacent to $10m, Activision UK has been forced to scale down its UK activities. As a result of this, rumours are circulating that Sierra On-Line, whose games Activision distribute in the UK, are to open a European office and sever their relationship with the troubled company. However, this was denied by Sierra spokesperson Kirk Green: 'We have a very good relationship with Activision,' he told us. 'It's true that we are thinking of opening a European office but that would be to support what Activision are doing,' he continued. If Sierra does decide to open a European office, it could only be good news for the company's many fans in the UK, as Sierra would almost certainly open a bulletin board similar to the one it has in the US at the moment. There might also be a drop in the currently inflated price of Sierra games from £44.95 to that of most UK games. The Sierra UK affiliate licence comes up for renewal in January 1991.

One result of Activision's troubles was the closure of adventure specialist Infocom. Picking up the pieces, though, is Virgin Mastertronic, which has acquired the rights to the Infocom back catalogue. Classics like **Hitchhiker's guide to the Galaxy** and **Leather Goddesses of Phobos** will be released on Virgin's budget label and premiered at the European Computer Entertainment Show. ST and Amiga versions will retail for £7.99, and the PC version for £9.99.

Impressive

The latest offering in the 'Plato' series from Impressions is **Blitzkrieg May 1940**, designed by Ken Wright whose previous credits include **Overlord** and **Napoleon at War**.

Players can choose to take the side of the Allies or the German Panzers. Due out the end of the month on the Amiga and ST.

Gold prize

First prize for the most prescient release of the month must go to Capcom and US Gold for **UN Squadron**. This tale of torment and flight simulations is set in the strife torn Middle East which is 'torn by violent civil war and conflict'. Available on the Amiga, *and* the ST. Wow!

Napped

Japanese corporation, Koei, are working on a Napoleonic game. This represents a marked change for the company which made its name specialising in simulations of oriental history. Although not available in the UK, imports of the American versions are available from some specialist retailers.

Renegade Tech

News reaches us that SSI, who converted **AD&D** to computer, have acquired the rights to the FASA Corporation's **Renegade Legion** – a futuristic space combat system set in the place where no man has... etc.

The first release will be **Interceptor**, which will incorporate over a dozen missions and feature high resolution graphics. PC version expected soon, Amiga version summer '91. And the poor old ST...?

Still with SSI, this voracious company have also got the licence to produce a series of Buck Rogers games, in conjunction with TSR, who own the trademark. The game system will be based on SSI's own **Pool of Radiance**. The first release will be **Countdown to Doomsday**, the IBM version of which should hit the streets at the end of the month. A 1 Meg version for the Amiga is expected around the same time.

The latest in the **AD&D** series will be **Shadow Sorcerer** which is more of a simulation of table top games than previous releases in the series. The most anticipated release, though, is **Eye of the Beholder**, a **Dungeon Master** type game featuring state-of-the-art graphics.

A Room With A View: Eye of the Beholder

THE CONVERTED

- **Chuck Yeager's Advanced Flight Trainer 2.0 for the Amiga and ST**
- **Police Quest II for the Amiga (1 Meg)**
- **Ultima V for the Amiga**
- **Leisure Suit Larry III for the Amiga and ST**
- **Space Rogue for the ST**
- **Dungeon Master for the PC**
- **Future Wars for the PC**
- **Colonel's Bequest for the Amiga**
- **Hero's Quest for the Amiga and ST**
- **Midwinter for the PC**
- **Hoyle's Book of Games for the ST**

DRAGONSTRIKE

DragonLance Combat Simulator

by Marcus L Rowland

DragonStrike is a flight simulator for dragons which pitches the forces of good (the player) against those of evil (the computer) during a fairly nasty war. The game is based on TSR's *DragonLance* adventures for **Advanced Dungeons & Dragons.**

The box contains four 360k disks, a manual, and eight cards that show some of the common opponents in the game: there appears to be no reason to use these cards during the game.

Although SSI recommends at least a 6MHz AT should be used, a faster machine is needed for 256 colour VGA with maximum detail. All graphics modes, however, are in 320x200 resolution which means that EGA and VGA cannot give their best performance. The game can be controlled by a mouse, joystick or keyboard.

The installation program creates a subdirectory on a hard disk (with at least a megabyte of space) and copies the files across. The only copy protection is a key word system.

A menu of scenarios is presented after the titles and the security screen have been displayed, but it is only possible to load a scenario that has already been played, the next one of the sequence, or one that has been designed by the player. Each scenario is preceded by an impressively illustrated briefing.

DragonStrike's scenarios escalate from reasonably safe to lethal. Most of them pit the player's dragon against at least two enemies, usually dragons and other flying nasties but sometimes also ships, flying citadels, enemy camps, and so forth.

Crystal Ball

The main screen shows the rider's view from the back of the dragon. This view is surrounded by indicators. A gauge to the right shows the height and attitude of the dragon as a moving sprite. Above it is a compass; below, two gauges show hit points as either bar charts or numbers. At the bottom left is a crystal ball which acts as radar. Below the main window are a dialogue box, used for reports such as 'A cone of fire hit you' or 'Low altitude', and three scales that show breath, power, and speed.

A row of icons at the bottom of the screen show magic items; novice players start with an arrow of enemy detection and two healing potions. The **DragonStrike** logo and insignia appear above and to the left of the main window. These graphics do nothing in the game; it would have been nice to have a larger field of view.

The main window shows the dragon's head, the position of the rider's lance, scenery and any enemies in view. It can also show side and rear views but these are rarely much use; the crystal ball and arrow are almost always more informative. The graphics are mostly good, though the enemy dragons are a little disappointing at close range.

Dragons use their power to fly or recharge their breath weapons. The breath weapons is slow to recharge if the dragon is climbing, but is available fairly often if the dragon is gliding. A dragon must rest if its power is reduced to zero. It is usually a good idea to climb early and then loiter at a high altitude to recharge and recover power until the enemy is close. This is not always true: some scenarios can be survived only by staying close to ground level; in other scenarios, however, this exposes the rider and dragon to arrow fire.

It doesn't seem to be possible to stall, although dragons can crash. Looping and rolling do not work in combat, although the dragon sometimes indulges in a preprogrammed victory roll after combat.

Craggy

Dragon combat is a little like a World War One dogfight: it takes place between manoeuvrable craft at low altitude over ridiculously craggy terrain. The difference is that the weapons are more dangerous: the rider can be killed by a single dragon breath in most scenarios.

Friendly dragons usually have two breath weapons: a ranged attack such as a lightning bolt and a comparatively slow short-ranged gas cloud. There are also several weapons for attacks at point blank range: the lance is usually lethal but must be

Designed by
Westwood Associates

Published by
SSI/US Gold

Price £29.99

Available for the PC and Amiga
Reviewed on the PC

PC version requires 512K and CGA minimum, 6mhz AT recommended.

PC version supports most video modes (exceptions: Hercules and Amstrad 1512 16-colour)

AdLib soundboard supported

aimed; the dragon will automatically use its claws or bite if an enemy is in range; and the rider automatically swings a sword if the enemy comes really close. Enemy dragons also have these attacks.

Careful tactics are needed; flying head-on into combat is usually suicidal, and it is advisable to split the enemy forces and try to pick them off one at a time.

There are some unexpected dangers: a rider can fall off the dragon, and the dragon can fly into water while believing it is the sky, fry its allies, or even fly into its own breath cloud. Hit points and expended equipment are not restored between scenarios, so it is a good idea to keep trying until a rider and dragon get through a scenario with minimal damage.

Combats usually last five to 10 minutes. Games can be saved after each combat – up to seven saves for each scenario – or another one can be loaded to start the next scenario.

An options menu allows the player to tailor the level of screen detail, choose bar charts or numbers for hit points, redefine the keyboard, load a saved game, or select other input devices. All these options can be saved. It is unfortunate that this menu is available only while a scenario is running.

The program intermittently clashed with memory resident software, locking up so badly that the machine had to be turned off rather than rebooted. It always ran correctly when the computer was booted without memory-resident programs.

The game seems to work well, and is probably the only dragon simulator. Anyone who wants to fly a dragon and who has a machine that can do justice to the graphics will probably get a good few hours of fun out of **DragonStrike**. A mouse seems to give the best flight control, with the joystick second and keyboard third and worse.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the game, because there is little basis for comparison. As a pure flight simulator the game does not contain enough detail: there is, for example, no long-range navigation. Controls and weapons are less precise than most realistic aircraft simulators.

Where **DragonStrike** scores is in its simulation of the **AD&D** universe and the sheer fun of aerial combat at point-blank range. Its disadvantage is that it needs an AT compatible: the Amiga version will probably run on a standard machine without a hard disk. It is possible to write small, fast graphics programs on a PC, but it appears that the programmers took easy options which led to the need for a fast machine. SP

HARLEY-DAVIDSON

The Road To Sturgis

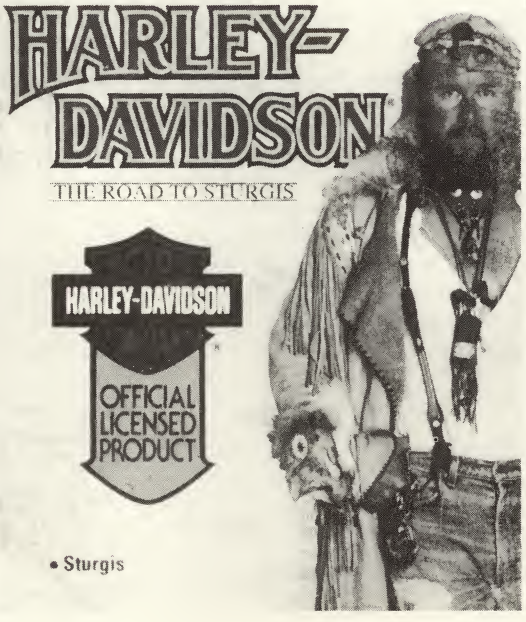
by John Harrington

Get your motor running. Head out on the highway. Looking for adventure, and whatever comes our way.' Not a right lot of adventure comes your way in this motor-sickle race game. You plough along the road on your Harley-Davidson, overtaking road-hogs and avoiding the oncoming traffic, in the hope of getting from Maine to Sturgis in 10 days (and in one piece).

The Mild One

Along the way you stop in towns to participate in one of five possible competitions with other Hell's Angels. The competitions are: Slow-ride, Drag race, Hill Climb, Poker Run and Weenie Run.

The last two are the best: the Poker Run involves driving along a route and snatching playing cards from bystanders at the side of the road, while for the Weenie Run you have a hot mama on your pillion whose task is to bite frankfurters suspended from above at various points along the road. So, you have five mediocre arcade games linked by one long dreary arcade game. The only strategy element comes in the form of customising your bike and designing a personality for yourself, but the appeal of being 'Filthy McNasty, King of the Road' quickly palls despite the liberal dose of biker humour. SP



Designed by Incredible Technologies

Published by Mindscape

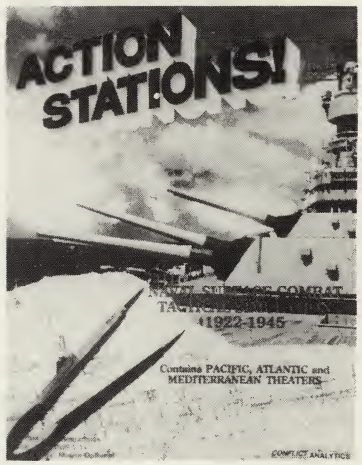
Price £29.99

Available on all formats
Reviewed on the PC

ACTION STATIONS!

Naval Surface Combat Tactical Simulation, 1922-1945

by Frank Dunn



Designed by Alan D Zimm

Published by Conflict Analytics/ Storm Software

Price £29.99

Reviewed on the PC

Amiga and ST versions available end of September

PC version requires 512K and CGA minimum, 6mhz AT recommended.

PC version supports most video modes (exceptions: Hercules and Amstrad 1512 16-colour).

AdLib soundboard supported.

An expansion disk containing 12 new scenarios will be released in January 1991

A First World War version of this game will be released in the first quarter of next year

THE TITLE says it all: this game is not about carriers and planes, but rather about those armoured leviathans which used to throw shells the weight of Volkswagens at each other, PT boats, cruisers and destroyers.

Action Stations! comes with a 180-page manual and four disks, all of which makes the game seem a bit weighty too; this impression is amplified once the 200 or so files are copied across and the game has been started. Once past the security check – a word needs to be looked up in the manual and typed in exactly as printed – there are 30 historic scenarios to choose from.

Menus R Us

Ships are controlled using the action menu, a screen that presents menus which can be pulled down using the cursor keys or a mouse. The mouse pointer, however, is not visible, which means the mouse's tracking might have to be altered to make the mouse usable: small movements can have menus popping down at bewildering speed.

The options are straightforward: Reports presents information and leads to the battle plot; Movement allows ships to be moved individually or by formation; Gun Director switches between manual and automatic aiming; Controls governs a miscellany of items such as torpedoes and spotter aircraft; and Options sets the turn length and is used to save the game.

A Tangled Plot

It is possible to play the game without becoming deeply involved in the minutiae of gunnery by setting the automatic option every turn and the program makes a best guess for each ships target. Similarly the movement system allows the use of formations by which groups of ships can be ordered en masse.

The battle plot – a map view of the battle – cleverly allows the player to go from it to most of the required actions, which obviates the need to access the action screen too often. The plot, however, shows the weakness of using CGA graphics because even the basic symbols are unclear when a large and confused battle is displayed.

Full Speed Ahead

Some relief is possible by scaling the plot up and down and centring it over a ship or single co-ordinate. Overlaying the plot with the firing traces to show which ship has fired at which target tends to make it more cluttered unless the plot is scaled down to specific sections of the battle.

The plot is a critical display that cries out for a higher graphics resolution; it should be the first item on any upgrade Alan Zimm considers because the game could then be played entirely from it.

Damn The Torpedoes

The game's mechanics accurately simulate surface warfare, and the origins of the game as an operational analysis model shows in the detail in elements such as gunnery. Although the player can operate from multiple viewpoints, this does not detract from the realism because a carefully planned battle line, for example, can become a shambles after trying to avoid a shoal of torpedoes.

The computer is a challenging opponent, possibly because of the two-dimensional nature of the simulation and the limited number of tactical doctrines available to naval gunnery and torpedo tactics.

Action Stations! has an excellent, if technical, manual which should prove helpful to players who are not certain what to do. The manual deserves full marks for covering everything, although it lacks an index.

Three In One

Much of the data in the manual comes in handy for the two scenario builders provided, particularly when designing a scenario from scratch. The generation program allows all the parameters to be randomised within player limits, thus creating a game against an opponent whose forces are unknown in detail.

The decision to provide two such programs is a brilliant touch because well-documented, historical battles can be constructed or varied at will, and ahistorical limited intelligence ones are easy to generate. It is not possible to edit the ships but there are 185 classes available to slot into any scenario.

Finishing Off

Although the initially amateurish look of the game can be off-putting, **Action Stations!** is technically correct and encompasses all the necessary elements. After realising that it is not necessary to get fully immersed in detail, the game quickly becomes enjoyable to play.

Its only detractions are the clunky look of the minimalist graphics and slow speed when a lot of ships are in play. The combat routines are quick, but there was almost two minutes of inaction on a 12MHz 286 PC during the visibility routine in the PQ 17 scenario with the convoy and its destroyer screen making smoke.

Action Stations! is an enjoyable game for naval fans and is certainly the best of its genre. SP

JACK NICKLAUS UNLIMITED GOLF & COURSE DESIGN

vs

PGA TOUR GOLF

by Brian Walker

THERE are people who subscribe to George Bernard Shaw's view that golf is nothing but a 'good walk ruined', and then there are golfers. Now there are computer golfers. It is difficult to discern which of the first two this reclusive breed falls into, but there is no doubt that computer golfers are well catered for.

Jack Nicklaus Unlimited Golf & Course Design will be the most familiar of the two games owing to the seminal **Major Championship Golf**, widely considered to be the market leader in this field despite being painfully slow. The new version, however, has lost this sluggishness and as a result is now a viable multi-player game as well as enhancing the solitaire mode.

PGA Tour Golf is not handicapped by slow speed either, and like the **JN** it can accept up to four human players at one time. Both games have databases which store the stats. '**PGA**'s is far more comprehensive – it records eight different categories while **JN** merely records a player's average round. At the first hole, then, a one-stroke lead to **PGA**.

The essence of **PGA** is the 'tour' of the self-designed courses by the tournament players club (TPC). The game comes with three TPC courses: Sawgrass Point, Florida; Avenel, in Potomac Maryland; and the Stadium course at La Quinta, California. An imaginary course is also included. The Nicklaus game comes with two courses; nine more are available as modules. The new ones are Muirfield in Dublin, Ohio, and The Bear's Track, which Nicklaus created using the accompanying course builder.

PGA may eventually get expansion disks, but until then the variety provided by the Nicklaus system

Done to a tee: PGA Tour Golf

allows it to pull a stroke back at the second hole.

Skin Heads

A player in the **PGA** tournament competes against 60 real golfers for prize money. The tournament consists of four rounds, although it is possible to be eliminated. As well as a regular round, the Nicklaus game provides the option of a 'skins' tournament, which is played for cash per hole. The **PGA** tournament and the skins game are great fun. Which one is best is simply a matter of taste, so it's all square at the third.

Neither game shows much difference on the driving range: each one uses a variation of the familiar power bar system. **PGA**'s is marginally easier, but each can be mastered with practice. In addition to the standard putts and drives **PGA** offers three special shots to get a player out of tricky situations. In the visual department **PGA** offers a scrolling overhead view of each hole, whereas the Nicklaus game offers a standard overhead view. **PGA** regains the lead, though, because of its post-shot graphics – the reverse view showing where the ball is about to drop is especially effective, and the program *automatically* shows an overhead view. In both games you can play a round (or tournament) with players the computer provides. I'd recommend this; in addition to the competitive edge it also helps your game to see how they handle the courses.

On to the putting green now. The contoured green finds favour in both games, and, in the absence of vector graphics, works well. The **PGA** system is slightly more refined in that there is a separate screen depicting the inclines and also text advising you of the exact lie. Despite this (or maybe because of) putting is easier in **JN**, but this simply makes **PGA** more of a challenge.

The graphics in both games are superb and surpass those of any golfing game hitherto released. The Nicklaus game uses vivid imagery; **PGA** is rather more pastoral.

Documentation, too, is excellent – the manuals just seem to get bigger

JACK NICKLAUS UNLIMITED GOLF & COURSE DESIGN

Designed by Ned Martin

Published by Accolade

Price £39.99

Available on the PC. ST and Amiga versions to follow

CGA, EGA, VGA and Hercules

AdLib, CMS and Roland soundboards supported

PGA TOUR GOLF

Designed by Lee Actor and Dennis Koble

Published by Electronic Arts

Price £34.99

Available on the PC ST and Amiga versions to follow

CGA, EGA, VGA and Hercules

AdLib, CMS, Roland and Tandy soundboards supported

No expansion disks planned at present

The Green Party: Jack Nicklaus' Unlimited Gold

And The Winner Is...

Both games are top notch. The only disappointment is the sound, or rather the lack of it. **PGA** claims to 'recognise' sound boards, though it failed to detect my AdLib while in **JN** sound is restricted to a rather wimpy theme tune. I would also have liked to have seen a facility whereby your best round for each course is recorded. **JN**'s database is especially limited in this area. Overall **PGA** is probably best for a quick round, because of its tournament play and especially the reverse angle shots. More committed players might prefer **JN**; the course-builder is a monster that bucks no competition. SF

Next issue: ***Indy 500*** *vs* ***Days of Thunder***

and bigger. The Nicklaus manual has 157 pages. More power to Accolade's elbow, for this is a splendid effort. In addition to explaining the game there is a wealth of background notes and an introduction to each hole. **PGA**'s manual is more modest, but no slouch either. In addition to the usual playing guide, there is a small history of the PGA and potted biographies of some of its stars.

JACK NICKLAUS' COURSE BUILDER

Most golfers fantasise about creating their own course. The only buffer between dreams and reality is not their imagination, but the inhospitable terrain and small size of their back garden. Welcome, then, to the **Jack Nicklaus Course Builder** – a small step for mankind, but a giant leap for golf architects.

The program is menu driven and, despite the many screens, is incredibly easy to use. Three plots of virgin land are provided, and it is also possible to edit the two courses that come with the game.

The manual recommends that all the holes are 'routed' before embarking on design: I would certainly endorse this as it aids geographical cohesion. Once the tee has been laid and the pin placed, the fairway is automatically laid down. Between these two points the program provides objects, such as trees and bunkers, with which to adorn the hole. More adventurous designers can create their own obstacles using the paintbox facility provided. Images drawn here can then be imported into the landscape.

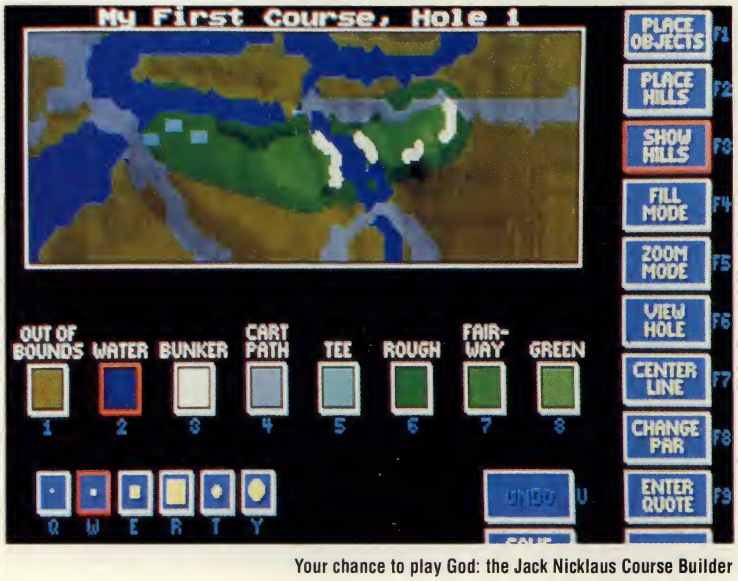
The customising even extends to the words of wisdom that Jack Nicklaus offers before each hole – the designers own notes can now be entered, but expletives will be discreetly deleted.

Plato's Law

The philosophy of the program is: 'nothing is permanent, everything is interchangeable'. The background scenery, even the green itself, can be recoloured pixel by pixel. All this is achieved using the point and click system offered by a mouse interface. A keyboard option is provided but the rodent is hard to beat. Bunkers, water, and hills can also be placed in this manner. Views are offered from every which way but up. The most impressive is the 'view hole' option whereby a 'wedge' appears which allows the exact angle of viewing to be specified.

Hills are probably the only disappointment in the program, but even that is more down to the one-dimensional nature – vector graphics excepted – of computer graphics rather than an inherent flaw of the game.

The manual provides a comprehensive guide to the aesthetic and practical problems of golf architecture. This means that beginners need not feel disturbed by the awesome creative power at their disposal. The chance to be a golf god is here. Now go mow that meadow! SF



Your chance to play God: the Jack Nicklaus Course Builder

JACK'S BACK

New features in Unlimited Golf

- Much faster screen updates
- Improved graphics in VGA mode
- Yardage scale on the overhead view
- Club member roster (a database) that records players averages
- Weather report
- Contoured putting green
- Instant replay and reverse angle replay
- Two new courses
- Course builder

FLIGHT OF THE INTRUDER

The Flying Frying Pan

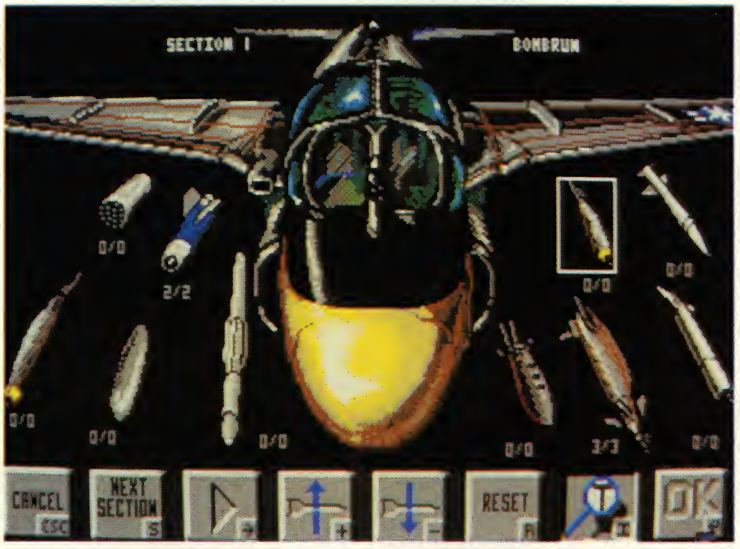
by Paul Rigby

There have been many flight simulations that have landed onto the desks of the marketing men and have been sold on the basis that this flight sim has a world 67 million miles wide, or contains 57 varieties of aircraft or has graphics so fast you're in danger of attracting a speeding ticket every time you play it. Yet how many of those flight simulations actually further the genre? Go on – have a think. Not too many, right?

Mirrorsoft's **Flight of the Intruder**, developed by UK software house Rowan software for Spectrum Holobyte in the States, is the first technically accurate fourth generation combat flight simulation to appear on the market. So what's a fourth generation flight sim?

This category is reserved for the elite of sims that move away from the idea of the single aircraft against the combined might of the enemy, embraces the idea of advanced artificial intelligence, gives priority to the environment the aircraft flies in rather than the aircraft itself and looks at the air 'battle' as a whole. A battle that, inevitably, will involve other people. People who will need help from you, people who can assist you, people with human skills, frailties, emotions and a mind of their own.

Subtleties such as these are extremely difficult to integrate into a flight sim – this is a new kettle of fish. The beginnings were first seen in Lucasfilm's **Their Finest Hour** and Dynamix's **A10 Tank Killer**. However, while they got the ball rolling they are not considered technically accurate – not a 'flight simulation' in the true sense of the word. **Flight of the Intruder** is the first in a new breed of flight simulations that combines technical excellence with the new age of 'humanising' the cold world of the 3-D polygon.



Minimum Loss

Intruder supports the Grumman A-6 Intruder and McDonnell Douglas F-4B/J Phantom flight models and is set in the heated skies of Vietnam, just before the Linebacker campaign in 1972 that took place over North Vietnam. The goal was to execute appointed missions with minimum loss. The difference between **Intruder** and a lot of other flight simulations is that, before, you looked after your own skin, now you must consider your wingman and the other flights that may accompany you. In fact you can control and direct a maximum of eight aircraft in any one mission. This is because any combat mission, whether it be Vietnam or anywhere else, needs support if it is to be successful. Hence the reason why I can never accept the claims from excited individuals that **Falcon/F-15 Strike Eagle II**/whatever is an accurate simulation – at least not with a straight face. An accurate flight model, yes, but not an accurate simulation.

So **Intruder** allows you to assign each flight (of two aircraft) the bombing run, another flight may be anti-SAM, another anti-AAA, escort, and so on. Getting one aircraft safely home is bad enough but juggling eight aircraft in the SAM/MiG/AAA filled skies of North Vietnam is a recipe for a tidy migraine.

Upon loading (watch out for the magnificent carrier launch introductory sequence) you will notice that **Intruder** is divided into three distinct sections. 'Scramble' gives you a repeat of the previous mission, a handy option for when you wish to replay a mission but don't want the hassle of resetting the configuration, tactics, and so on. The next area is split into two and will form the basis of most people's first look at the game mechanics. Called 'Phantom...' and 'Intruder Pilot Brief' you get to fly your first mission along with a hand-holding tutorial chapter.

However, the main section of **Intruder** is the CAG (Commander Air Group) option. On selection of this option you become the CAG who

Designed by
Rowan Software

Published by
Mirrorsoft

Price £34.99

Available for the PC only

must choose a primary mission, which can be anything from attacking torpedo boats to hitting an airfield. Then you select your secondary mission, which you can pick from around six or seven sites around the main target. From this screen you designate the weapons for each flight and investigate basic intelligence for any area on the game map of Vietnam.

One of the principle jobs of any CAG is his man management duties. This is integrated into **Intruder** by the option of being able to manipulate the crews for each aircraft. So you will have to make sure each crew is up to the job assigned to them as they each have individual stats including ratings for wild weasel (anti-SAM), fatigue factor, dogfighting, and others. Make sure you take care of your men, though, because if you lose any you'll be given green recruits as replacements.

Waypoints

An excellent feature of **Intruder** is the waypoint allocation. It's about time that someone took notice of waypoints as they are the hinge that can make the success or failure of a mission. **Intruder** supports them admirably. In this case you tell each flight exactly when they can take off, what course to take (right down to exact latitudes and longitudes), what to do on the way there (fly in combat or cruise formation, jink, and so on), what height to fly at and what time they should reach a particular waypoint so you can co-ordinate an attack that will be flow like poetry in motion, with timed attacks right down to the last second.

Target information takes the form of some basic information on its position and description. Sometimes you will also get a black and white photo of the target. This can be a very useful feature. For example, it'll prevent you hitting the wrong bridge during the heat of battle.

After you've taken off from the carrier you will see your wing-man close up and enter formation behind you. The other aircraft will be taking off too, depending on the time you allocated them (flight can be speeded up with an Accelerated Time feature). Once everybody's up and running you can easily switch between aircraft and take control. You can do this at any time so that you will always be in the thick of the action. In fact, you will need to do this if you wish to take the credit and the points for an operation. Gain enough points and you'll get an operations badge for that strike. Medals are also possible if you've done enough to earn one. The difficulty factor increases the higher the rank you choose.

The flight models have been well implemented. The F-4 Phantom feels like a combat fighter. It produces and retains 'energy' or speed more successfully than the **Intruder** which can feel like you are flying a whale at times. Therefore, it is easier to stall the **Intruder**.

Similarly, the basic research on the quirks of each aircraft and their respective avionics have been well implemented. For example, the AIM-7 Sparrow air-to-air missile was in its initial development cycle during Vietnam. It was infamous for its lack of reliability. Rowan have, accordingly, altered the success ratio for the Sparrow. In addition, Rowan have supplied a Rules of Engagement option which submits you to the same crippling flight conditions experienced by the all US pilots in Vietnam.

Other elements include the very smoky J79 engines on the F-4 Phantom. Check out the external viewpoints to see this feature has been included. Also watch the smoke disappear when afterburner is engaged – again, true to real-life.

Flight aficionados may notice a realistic implementation of the wing-over manoeuvre during the bomb-run approach. This has, previously, been very difficult to program due to large amount of computational power required.

Avionics

Joystick response is accurate as it is easy to spend all of your time over-compensating if you are too heavy handed. The avionics fit in both aircraft have been well integrated. The Intruder's DIANE bombing/navigation system has been cleverly programmed to give the 'highway' in the sky.

Landing, which is done on a moving carrier deck, is very realistic. Not only do you have an angle of attack reading but the carrier provides its own 'meatball' guidance system which is visible from your cockpit. Once you've landed you'll be rated, points being awarded and deleted for the quality of the landing. Landing can be completed using a handy rudder feature that enables a 'slip approach', using a standard joystick.

This review was based upon the pre-release version 1.1. I tried the initial 1.0 version (released, rather prematurely, in the States) and found it to be bug-ridden – the game froze on me a few times. No such bug occurrences were found in 1.1. Enhanced features of version 1.1 include a redesigned joystick 'feel', more sounds (via the PC speaker and AdLib sound board) and support for two joysticks (analogue joystick or yoke and pedals). Also you will only need to enter the program configuration once. It will be saved to disk and automatically loaded from then onwards.

There was one glitch that I reported to Rowan which, they say, is out of their hands. The AdLib card

sound does deteriorate, somewhat, with the joystick selected. Giving a rather stuttered engine sound (which, curiously, does not appear when autopilot is selected). Rod Hyde, of Rowan software, explains:

'We don't recommend the Adlib engine sound and the joystick at the same time because of the way we're using the Adlib. We are using the Adlib sound board to produce digitised sound. We've got a timer and we are sampling at a tremendous rate. The joystick had to be sampled at a high rate, too. Basically, the two get in each other's way. Whereas most of the Adlib sounds will sound okay with the joystick, the engine sound, because of its long duration, doesn't let the joystick have a go, as it were. I don't think we'll ever be successful with that problem.'

Even with that slight drawback, I consider **Flight of the Intruder** to be the best flight simulation I have ever played – and I've played them all. As an aviation journalist and aircraft buff I am happy with the technical content, as a computer journalist I praise the programming and the immense value for money. **Flight of the Intruder** is, pardon the pun, like a breath of fresh 'air'. SP

COMING UP FOR AIR

Paul Rigby talks to Rowan Software, the designers of ***Flight of the Intruder.***

Rowan and Spectrum Holobyte spent a long time researching **Intruder**. Books are a necessary stand-by. However, further information was obtained in other ways. There are a number of survivors from the war who were able to provide a positive contribution that enhanced the technical areas of the program as well as the atmosphere. But what specific work did Rowan do for **Intruder**? Rod Hyde:

'The biggest thing I did for that was to go over to California. I spent three days with a chap called Norman Cosand who flew as a back-seater in the Vietnam war on F-4s. He used to fly it too. The front seaters used to let the back-seaters fly on the way to a mission and on the way back, to give them some experience and to give the chap in the front time to write his notes up so he could go straight to the bar when he landed!'

Norman Cosand provided valuable information on bomb-runs and general aspects of flying the F-4 as well as the tactics and maps. In addition, Norman supplied three audio tapes of missions. A couple were missions he went on. There were another set that gave examples of very dramatic action:

'In one case you can hear the last five or ten minutes of a F-4 pilot and co-pilot who'd got themselves a damaged plane. You can hear the whole rescue system. Another F-4 comes up and flies alongside and goes around giving him damage status. This particular one is a sad sequence. In the very early F-4s if the back-seater punched out first there was a pressure set up such that the front-seater couldn't punch out – and that's what happened in this case. So they only got one of the chaps out.'

Action sequences such as these provided much needed atmosphere and 'real-life' details such as radio chatter. During the multi-flight CAG option of **Intruder** you will see lots of radio chatter. Some of it has no bearing on your aircraft, although it does update you on how the mission is progressing. Your RIO or B/N will also chat to you: warning of SAMS, saying you are behind schedule, and so on.

Gilman Louie, Spectrum Holobyte's CEO was able to provide much of the **Intruder** information (performance and weapon data) along with direct help from Stephen Coonts himself. Coonts was able to contribute help on bombing techniques and MIL depression advice for bombing.

One of the late additions to **Intruder** was the rudder option:

'It is not a full rudder implementation – there's no effect on pitch, for example. It was something we added right at the end to help in the carrier landings because as the carrier moves it is quite a difficult task to line yourself up. The rudder is a heading change only.' SP

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IMPERIUM

Worlds In Conflict: Worlds In The Balance

by Jonathan Turner

IT SEEMS to me that Game Designers Workshop should be renamed Game Revampers Workshop. Recently they have brought us new editions of **A House Divided** and **Blue Max**, and now they have put **Imperium** through the redesign wringer.

For those readers who have played the original edition, there are only three major differences. The first is the picture on the box. This is absolutely dreadful. The next is a background booklet, which is full of turgid atmospheric narrative. It really is unnecessary, as anyone with half an imagination can fabricate the subtext that takes their fancy, and as this booklet is of the typical 'big evil empire muscling in on Earth's territory and getting its nose bloodied for its efforts' school, it's nothing we couldn't already have guessed.

The final change is by far the most serious, however. This is the presentation of the rules and tables. The original rules were clear and concise; these quite simply are not. It took me an hour or so of poring over them just to realise that there weren't any changes! A particularly glaring example of the lack of care with which this new edition has been put together is the example on the bottom of page 7 which contradicts the rules, as well as leaving some of the combat phases out completely.

There are also some minor changes to the game, there being only one reference sheet instead of two, and the mapboard missing some star systems. This doesn't matter as the ones that are omitted never seemed to be used anyhow, because of the constraints of the movement system.

The reason that these changes are particularly unforgivable is that **Imperium** is an extremely good game. It postulates a space war extremely believably, breaking it down neatly and manageably into a sequence of campaigns. It also defines the two sides in the conflict very well, which is especially apparent in the different weaponry of the two civilisations, and therefore their tactics.

Topographical

There is nothing particularly mind-boggling about the game system, it is simply very efficient. Each player turn consists of: income and expenditures (each side's methods of production differs slightly); movement, which is mostly down the hyperspace jump lines on the map, giving the game a topographical feel; combat, both in space and on the surface of the planets, as necessary; the opponent reaction phase, in which one group of ships can be moved up to three stars away (the Terran player finds this phase more useful, as his two fronts are close enough to have only one stack of ships in the middle, which can reach both); second movement and second combat for the player whose turn it is.

The combat system is simple: each battle is fought in rounds, either at long or short range, depending on player agreement or dice roll. Each ship has two combat factors, signifying its beam strength and its missile strength. Beams are more deadly, but this is counterbalanced by the fact that they can only be used at short range, and the first round of combat must happen at long range. The Empire's strength is missiles, and the Terrans have better beam technology.

Ships are paired off for each round, and combat is simultaneous. Each ship's relevant factor is cross referenced with its opponent's shield factor, resulting in a number that must be rolled over for the attack to be successful. A battle continues until one side is destroyed or breaks off.

There are various options, such as high intensity missile fire and suicide attacks, which add to a highly usable and exciting combat system. The systems for planetary bombardment, surface to air and surface combat are likewise simple and effective. One touch that I felt could have been changed from the original game is the notation on the counters: the beams are the first value on each counter, whereas missiles are always used first in combat, a reversal of these positions would have added clarity.

Glory Index

The object of each campaign is to capture outposts and worlds from one's opponent, which moves the glory index in one's favour. This index is a reflection of how the emperor perceives the imperial governor, and as the game progresses the stakes are gradually raised, forcing a result by turn ten of each session. This restricts the game to manageable chunks. At the end of each the effects of the peace are calculated, and can be written down for the next session. Like all the best games, losing one battle does not lose the war, and so it takes a while for there to be absolutely no way out for one or other side.

One of the most telling features of the game is the governor's relationship with his empire. At the beginning of each turn, something happens in the empire. This random event can be anything from a mandated offensive to Imperial succession. Also, the governor can appeal for increased finances or production, which is risky, as the glory index is moved in the Terrans' favour each time this is done (obviously the emperor doesn't like wimps working for him).

All in all, **Imperium** is still a very good game, which I would recommend wholeheartedly. I would say, however, that if you can get your hands on a copy of the original, I'd buy it in preference to the new edition. SP

Designed by
Frank Chadwick

Published by
GDW

Price £17.95

2 Players

WINCHESTER

A Knight's Errand

by David Pritchard

What's in a name? Quite a lot when it comes to games. Abstract games are notoriously difficult to title meaningfully. One approach which has enjoyed commercial success in the past is to abandon the attempt and aim at subliminal marketing. Pick an instantly recognisable three syllable word, preferably a proper noun, that at the same time strikes a chord of mystery: **Kensington, September, Cavendish**.

David Watts, whose reputation has been built on good games at bottom-of-the-market prices, adopts the formula with **Winchester**, though here the second syllable has a cunning relevance. **Winchester** is a race game in which the pieces are moved like chessmen. Which chessmen depends on the roll of a special die.

The chequered circuit is four squares wide. Initially, 24 square markers are placed round the board giving a different layout every game. These act as blocks which can be crossed only by knights. Each player has two or more pieces. If you capture an opponent's piece you merely change places. Since in the multiplayer game everyone moves according to the same die roll, the last to play in each round has an advantage. First man home earns 15 points, and so on down. There is also a system of bonus points.

Winchester has marked similarities with at least two earlier games, Alex Randolph' **Steeple Chess** (1976) and Stracheck's **Cavalcade** (inventor, year, anyone?). **Cavalcade** has fixed obstacles, whereas **Steeple Chess** has a player-movable as well as fixed obstacles.

My experience of **Winchester** (a 2- and 4-player game) suggests a shorter circuit, fewer obstacles and fewer pieces – all easy to adapt – would make a quicker and better game. SP

Designed by
David Watts

Published by
Rostherne Games

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THE BACKGAMMON HANDBOOK

No Blot Unturned

by Brian Walker

Written by
Enno Heyken and
Martin B Fischer

Published by
The Crowood Press

Price £14.95

There's an old saying in backgammon that you 'pay for lessons'. Usually this is uttered by someone who has just been on the wrong end of a thrashing. It is hard, therefore, to put a price on anything that can help reduce the cost of such 'lessons'.

What price then *The Backgammon Handbook*, one of the best books on the subject since Joe Dwek's seminal *Backgammon for Profit* (long out of print). Approximately half of the *Handbook's* 231 pages are taken up with advanced play, the highlight being the annotated match (with analysis) between Bill Robertie and Nick Ballard – two of the world's top players. The book is worth the price for this alone.

Elsewhere the book covers the basics through to use of the doubling cube and an exercise in probability. The section on the former is a bit light, though that's not surprising; the doubling cube is now reckoned to be the single most important aspect in the game. Its correct use is one of the most challenging aspects of backgammon not only because of psychology involved, but also because of the difficulty in assessing probability ratios in specific across-the-board situations.

Teutonic

The diagrams in the book are well laid out and the accompanying analysis thoughtful without being overbearing. The section on backgames contains the sage advice that they should be avoided unless there is no alternative (or unless you want to throw your money away). The authors are both German, this book being an excellent translation of the Teutonic original.

Encouragingly, given the awfulness of the current crop, Mr Heyken is currently working on a backgammon computer program that he hopes will attain 'world class level'. In the interim, if you play backgammon for money, save yourself a fortune and buy this book. SP

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FOOTBALL STRATEGY

Happy Birthday To You

This autumn marks the 30th anniversary of ***Football Strategy****, the game that launched author Tom Shaw's career in the games business. Shaw, now executive vice-president of Avalon Hill, has spent more years in gaming than anyone else has yet admitted to. Here he imparts a bit of the madness that got him into this industry.*

Football Strategy is published by the Avalon Hill Game Company, price £12.35. Available from most specialist games shops.

The British have a new toy: American football. I understand that NFL games are being piped into the UK, not to mention visits by the professional teams in the flesh. Gadzooks – not since 1066 has there been this much sporting excitement happening on British soil.

Football, however, is old hat to Americans. Thirty years ago football, especially professional football, languished in the 'four yards and a cloud of dust' syndrome. Then along came Johnny Unitas, the young Baltimore Colt quarterback, to revolutionise the pro game. Unitas was the inspiration for the design of **Football Strategy**. Strategy and intimidation was Unitas's game plan: he did the unexpected; he would call the long pass when only six inches was needed; and he would call play 17 when play one was the logical choice. Oops ... I'm getting ahead of myself.

The design of **Football Strategy** was conceived when I was developing an aversion to pain. Not all football players will admit to feeling pain – some can't even spell it.

I hated pain, and I rued the day that I joined a sandlot football team. This was flag-football: instead of tackling a ball carrier, all one had to do was to grab the carrier's flag – which was a handkerchief looped around his belt at each hip. Some ball carriers resorted to tying their handkerchiefs so it was not uncommon to have to pin one to the ground to get the flag off, trousers, underwear and all.

Shortly thereafter, a genuine plastic flag became *de rigeur*. This was a 24"x3" plastic strip attached to the hip by a suction cup. Many players, however, continued to enjoy the thrill of pinning a ball carrier to the ground to remove flag, pants, underwear and all. Female attendance at games soared.

Flag football turned into organised mayhem. I checked into the nearest hospital at the end of the season. Grateful for being in one piece, I swore never to play again. There was only one thing for a football junkie to do: design a football board game.

Football Strategy became a practical alternative to my deranged obsession of playing football. No one, however, sits down and designs a game in a day. It took a sleepless night brought on by an overdose of York Peppermint patties to get the mechanics down pat. Within an hour I had the specifics written of a matrix system that offset the Unitas-style offence against basic defences. It was a first for football board games at the time (1959)! Why no one had thought of it before was a mystery to me.

The matrix underwent considerable number-crunching and balancing, although it is still the same 200-variable matrix of its initial design: 20 offensive plays versus 10 defences. There were not too few, yet not too many variables – the happy

medium! Memorising 200 different results did not seem to be too taxing.

Balancing The Matrix

'Regarding the design of your **Football Strategy** game I have enclosed a copy of a paper published for our football league which uses your game. The statistics we have compiled in four full years using **Football Strategy** are indeed a tribute to the accuracy of this game's design. We have enjoyed hours and years thanks to this game and hope, in sharing the following statistics with you, you in turn will feel a special pride in your design of this fine game.' – Gary Pisarki, Pigskin Football League.

This quote says it all and, yes, I did feel pride in a letter such as this. Along with other similar testimonials, it helped convince Avalon Hill to add this game to its line. **Football Strategy** was first published by a printing salesman friend who took this on as a favour to me after all the main game publishers turned it down.

The initial difficulty with the design focused on recreating scores that approached those of real life. Given that I had season tickets to watch the Baltimore Colts, I was able to plot a season's play calls.

The first version, published by the Strategy Game Company in 1960, appeared in a blue and white tube (Baltimore Colt colours) and retailed for the princely sum of $3. It was wildly successful in the Philadelphia and Baltimore area (we sold more than 120). At the time I was a copywriter at an advertising agency. I wrote dramatic prose selling items like $5 000 000 Ellicott Dredges. 'Need some dirt scooped out of the Thames? Boy, have we got an exciting product for you!'

Charlie Roberts of Avalon Hill, just down the street from the agency, soon made me an offer I couldn't refuse... I unhesitatingly accepted because it would not involve any heavy lifting.

Football Strategy and **Baseball Strategy** joined the Avalon Hill line soon afterwards. The rest is history, as they say. SP

GAME PLAN

Our development team is currently working on the annual updates for **Statis Pro Football** and **Paydirt**, two stats oriented games that have been outstandingly successful for Avalon Hill in the US. **Paydirt** and sister game, **Bowl Bound**, both borrow from **Football Strategy** in that each includes a matrix that serves as a basis for offense and defense play calls. But **Paydirt** and **Bowl Bound** have taken the system one step further by calibrating each matrix to the specific abilities and deficiencies of the individual teams.

For example, **Paydirt** includes a different matrix for each of the 26 NFL pro teams. If played optimally, the team that won the Super Bowl in real life should do so in **Paydirt**. **Bowl Bound** creates the same aura for college football. The current version of **Bowl Bound** features the 20 greatest college teams fro the 1980s.

The most popular of four Avalon Hill football games is now **Statis Pro Football**. It allows for solitaire play without sacrificing the realism and authenticity of the play-selection process. And because it includes individual cards for each of the 1300+ NFL players, **Statis Pro**

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1853 REFITTED

Engineers Stuart Dagger and Steve Jones report from the shed.

THE APPLAUSE with which Francis Tresham's admirers greeted **1853** on its eventual publication last year was less enthusiastic than expected. Yes, it was a good game, but it didn't seem to quite match up to **1829** or **1830**. We think there were three reasons for this.

The first is that the anticipation period was too long. Those of us who attend hobby conventions had known about the game and been clamouring for its publication for the best part of ten years. It would be hard for any game to live up to the expectation that had built up.

The second is that **1853** is deliberately quieter than **1830**. We knew this, but when you have become used to a game with clear and manifold opportunities for nastiness, one where you have to dig deeper for the weaponry can seem a little tame. This was an over hasty and superficial reaction, the fault of the critics not the designer.

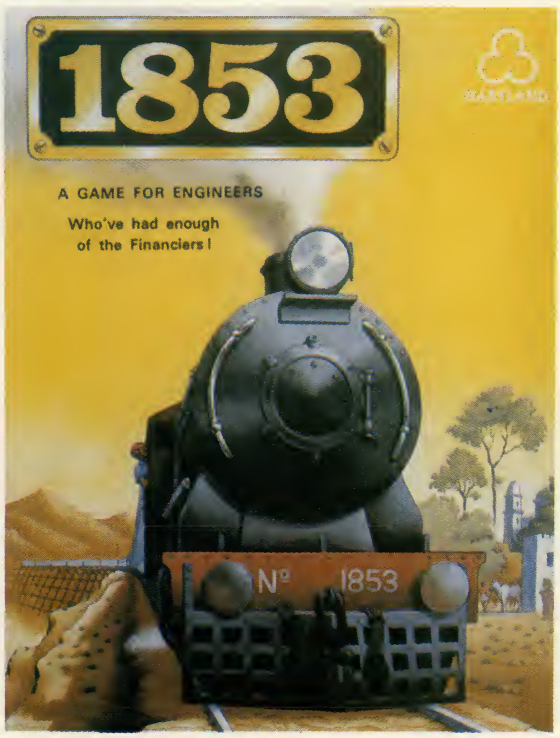
The third is that, in our view at least, the game is not quite in balance. It has some excellent ideas, but when put under pressure in a hard school they don't work quite as well as intended. Perhaps Francis's circle of playtesters contains too many gentlemen and not enough Diplomacy players. It is our aim in this article to suggest how the game can be made more robust without changing the designer's basic intentions.

These intentions, as we see them, are for a game in which companies compete within constraints imposed by a higher authority. In domestic terms it is the challenge of annoying your brother or sister while your parents are in the room. And of getting away with it. We would be opposed to any attempt at altering this basic theme. So the territorial restrictions remain, though we have added a rule which enables the more powerful and successful companies to put some dents in them in the later stages. This is partly to introduce a measure of anxiety at a point when the game might be getting a little quiet and friendly and partly to simulate the fact that in life powerful companies often end up with enough political clout to get rules modified in their favour.

The changes that we have made mostly concern the bidding,which we see as both the game's best idea and biggest source of problems. As things stand it is very easy to put yourself out of contention simply by being outguessed at this stage, and we don't consider it satisfactory that 4-hour games should be lost in the first ten minutes. Francis, of course, was aware of the risks but considered that it was up to the players to negotiate their way round them in an initial diplomacy phase. If you play with gentlefolks this may work well, but in the circles in which we find ourselves there is no guarantee that your partner can be trusted and an absolute certainty that an eavesdropper can't be.

The solution we offer opens up the bidding process in a way that enables you to take evasive action if you seem to be either being double-crossed or heading on a collision course with a more advantageously placed rival. At the same time we have taken steps to balance the attractions of the various companies for would-be bidders. At present companies 1-4 hold all the advantages: more capital, faster building rates and much easier access to the most highly profitable routes. This is probably historically accurate, but games work better when the decisions to be made are close ones; so we have given the minor companies a boost and made the major ones work a little harder. Our hope is that this will take the 'well, this company is obviously better than that one' out of the bidding, and thereby give full rein to the bidding mechanism's potential for providing varied starts and hence varied games.

We have also come to the conclusion that, when it comes to determining a winner, the game doesn't entirely live up to its claim to be a railway *building* game. When you count up at the end, what matters in **1853** is the same as what matters in **1829** and **1830**: the number of high-



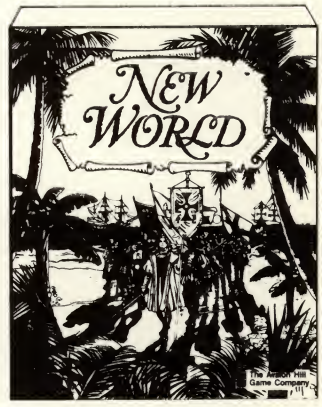
1853 was designed by Francis Tresham and is published by Hartland Trefoil

It is available from specialist games shops and by mail order, price £39.99

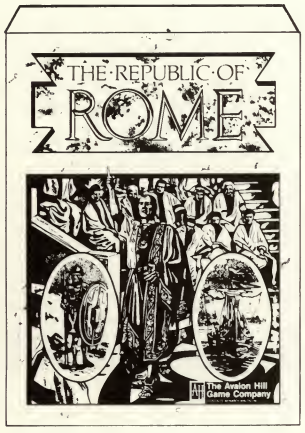
The Good! The Bad! The Ugly!

Three new strategy games from Avalon Hill!

The good! You lead your nation in an exploration of the **New World!**



NEW WORLD **$25**
Bursts onto the gaming scene in plenty of time to celebrate the quincentennial of Columbus' voyage of discovery. Two to six players represent colonizing European powers plotting the exploration, settlement, and exploitation of the New World. Players vie with each other for the richest territory—shipping crops and gold home to finance their expansion. In the process they must deal with native uprisings, storms at sea, harsh climates, and the incursions of their neighbors anxious to stake out a claim on valuable territory. The Discovery version wherein players must flip hex tiles as they enter new areas even adds the element of chance as players must strike out into uncharted areas not knowing what rewards or dangers that area holds.



The bad! You develop the ruthless politics necessary to win Consulship in **Republic of Rome!**

REPUBLIC OF ROME **$35**
A diplomatic game for three—six players in which each represents a faction of influential Senators vying for the Consulship of Rome—and all the power, wealth, and influence that entails. Naturally, each faction opposes the others, but must also court the others to get what it wants. Consequently, the "you-scratch-my-back, I'll-scratch-yours" of modern day politics is much in vogue, but the game holds far more than that in store as it hurls a bewildering array of temptations and dangers before the players in the form of 192 cards depicting all the events of the ancient world. The result is a fascinating four hour trip through time as players relive the 250 years of the Roman Republic from the tremendous struggle against Carthage to the assassination of Julius Caesar.

The ugly! You maliciously apply an assortment of "legal" holds against opponents in **Wrasslin'!**

WRASSLIN' **$15**
A quick-playing game that pokes fun at Pro Wrestling while remaining a surprisingly accurate simulation of the mayhem that occurs between the turnbuckles. Players have their pick of 24 individually rated, fictional grapplers—half "good" guys and half, well, you know. Each can play an assortment of holds on his opponent based on his current ratings for Strength, Agility, Stamina, Skill, and pure bulk. The result is a more "realistic" view of what happens in the ring than actually takes place there most of the time. Not to say that everything is above board; "bad guys" with managers can distract the referee to allow illegal holds or restart pin counts. Matches can be over in five minutes or last upwards of an hour. Tag Teams, Handicap matches, and Battle Royals allow any number to play.

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valued shares that you own. The most significant rule in any of these games is the one that limits the number of share certificates that you may hold, and it means that every share that you hold in a company with a low share price is a dent in your winning prospects, even if the shares are paying goodish dividends. The size of the bank means that **1853** has a natural playing length of about 18-20 operating rounds. Get out the share price chart and count. A company needs to be in play from the start, and to have a high starting position, if it is to reach those sections where the shares become really valuable. Our solution to this is a rule which enables those companies which are being run well and are paying high dividends relative to their share price to make faster progress up the chart. It increases the rewards for good routes, enables companies to overhaul those which began ahead of them and enables really well run companies to threaten that magic 400 at the end of the chart.

Rule Modifications

1. The bidding for contracts is taken in stages. The information available by the end of the process will be much as in the original game but you will no longer be bidding blind.

In the first stage all players secretly write down the amount of their bid. Your bid may be for any whole number of pounds, provided this is enough to cover the values of the cities that you will eventually write down. You do not need to decide at this stage just what those cities are going to be. The minimum and maximum numbers of cities for a legal bid remain as in the standard rules. All players then reveal the amount of their bids, and the seating order is determined – first the player who has made the largest bid, and so on down. Ties are resolved by lot, and the player who has made the largest bid takes the Elephant. Each player places his or her bid money in an envelope.

Beginning with the Elephant holder, and continuing round, each player starts to write down the cities in their bid and to claim the associated shares. When it is your turn you write down (secretly) the name of *one* of the cities in your bid and claim (publicly) a share associated with that city. This continues round and round the table until everyone signifies that their bid is complete by passing. When it is your turn you may not pass if *either* you have not yet contracted for the minimum number of cities *or* you have not yet contracted for the maximum number of cities and there is at least £40 of your bid money not yet accounted for.

Players now pay for their contracted shares as in the standard game. The rules governing shares that you have contracted for but can not yet afford are unaltered.

The first share buying round now commences, beginning with the player who is first in the seating order.

2. Directorships are not allocated until the end of the first share buying round. At this point those companies entitled to a director receive one. The person appointed is the one with the most shares in the company; ties are broken in favour of the player who has held shares in the company longest.

3. The restrictions on the cities you may include in a bid are increased from the present 'not more than two Ganges valley cities including Calcutta' to the following: in a bid involving just three cities a player may only include one of Cawnpore, Lucknow, Allahabad, Benares and Patna; and in a bid involving more than three cities a player may not include more than two of the Ganges cities (in other words the above list plus Calcutta).

4. The rule which says that you may not sell shares in a company in the round which sees it floated does not apply in the first share buying round; in this round you may sell such shares, but only if they were contracted shares and only if you sell them at the first opportunity after flotation.

5. In the first operating round of a major company (companies 1-4, and possibly also company 5 – see rule 6) the director of the company must choose one of the following alternatives:

(a) the right to lay two tiles in an operating round does not come into effect until phase two.

(b) the right to lay two tiles in an operating round is gained immediately but must be paid for whenever it is used. If this option is taken, whenever the company lays/promotes two tiles in an operating round it pays the bank at the following rates: company 1 – £40, companies 2 & 3 – £30, company 4 (and 5, if this is a major) – £20.

6. Company 5 may be either a major or a minor company. Which it is will depend on the Contract Bid of its first director.

(a) If company 5 has a director by the end of the first share buying round, and if the Contract Bid of its director includes both Ajmer and Bombay, the company is deemed to be a major one, with its second home base in north Bombay. Further, the cost of building the station at Ajmer is reduced to £70.

(b) In all other circumstances company 5 is a minor one.

7. Minor companies (6-8, and possibly also 5) may buy metre gauge trains of types 2 and 3 one phase before they would normally be due, subject to the following restrictions:

(a) at any one time a company may only have one train whose normal time of availability has not yet arrived.

(b) a train whose normal time of availability has not yet arrived may not be sold to another company.

(c) a prematurely bought train 2M-train costs £350; a prematurely bought 3M-train costs £550.

If any of these early trains are bought, the train mix is adjusted as follows:

If the first such train is a 2M-train, add a 2M-train to the bank on the purchase of the first premature train and a 3M- train on the purchase of the second. With each of these additions remove from the bank one of the currently available standard gauge trains, provided this is a 2 or a 3.

If the first such train is a 3M-train, do a similar adjustment, but only for this first purchase: add a 3M-train and, if available, remove a 3-train.

8. Eight Type-58 broad gauge 10-value station tiles (from your **1830** set) are added to the game. These may be laid under the usual rules governing yellow tiles. They may not be upgraded to £30 Green station tiles.

9. In the 4-player game decrease the number of certificates that need to be sold for a company to float from 6 to 5, and in the 6-player game decrease it from 5 to 4.

10. The 6-trains become available as soon as the first 5-train is bought. When the first 5-train is brought the territorial restrictions which have applied hitherto are relaxed: companies owning at least one 5-train or 6-train may now promote any tile and buy any station which they can reach from a home base using one of their trains. A company buying or promoting out-

side its home territory must include the affected tile in one of its routes in the operating round when the change takes place.

11. A company which pays a dividend which is at least 20% of its current share price advances two positions, rather than one, on the share price chart.

Notes on the rule changes

1. This is the major change. The problems with the existing bidding mechanism stem from the lack of reliable information about other people's intentions and the enforced inflexibility in one's own bid. Our solution is to expand the bidding phase so as to give you more information on which to base your decisions. You do not get to know the cities in other player's contracts but do see which companies they involve. This removes most of the guesswork and gives you greater control over your destiny.

By allowing the bond money to be any amount (within limits) we have reduced the chance of ties and thus the need for tie-breaking procedures when determining the seating order.

The £40 rule is there because we believe there should be a correlation between the size of the bond and the difficulty of getting it back. Without this a player could bid high so as to get a favourable place in the seating order and then contract for the minimum so as to get the money back early: all the advantages with few of the drawbacks.

2. This is worded as it is in order to inhibit a 'shadowing strategy' during the bidding. In this, player A bids £20-£30 more than his rival B. After his first share nomination he copies every nomination by B. At the end of the bidding stage the two players will have the same number of shares in the disputed company. A, being earlier in the order, then takes control as soon as share dealing starts, with nothing that B can do to defend himself.

We didn't want an artificial rule outlawing this parasite strategy but we did want it to be much more expensive and difficult to pull off.

3. This is part of our attempt to rebalance the attractions of the various companies at the bidding stage: it makes it a little bit harder for the directors of companies one and two to get their bond money back quickly.

4. This is to help maintain players' flexibility when making city bids. There are clear instances when one wishes to make a tactical bid for a share in another company, the intention being to swap it during the first share dealing round for a share in the company one wishes to float. However, the existing rules stop you doing this if the company is floated before your turn comes round. Hence this change.

5. This is another part of the rebalancing. The director of a major company must now decide whether the speediest possible return of the bond money and development of routes is worth the long-term drain on the company finances. We have tried to make it a close decision and one which depends on circumstances.

6. This was put in to make the BBCI a more attractive company to bid for. Its territory makes it look as though it ought to be a major company, and so we have created the conditions under which it can become one. These include reducing the cost of getting it started by halving the cost of building its home base. Bombay as a second home base seemed logical in view of the company's name.

7. This is the 'boost the minor companies' part of our rebalancing effort. They are companies which are likely to want to go metric; this enables them to do so in phase one. The increased lifespan of these prematurely bought M-trains is the reason for the extra cost. The various conditions attached to this 'buy early' privilege are to ensure game balance and to make sure that metre gauge doesn't take over the game. As it is you may well find that you need more metre gauge track than the game supplies. The way to overcome this problem is to buy one or two copies of the expansion kit that Hartland Trefoil offers. Doing this does not distort the game; the rule book itself states that the number of pieces of yellow track supplied was not a design feature, but a question of deciding what ought to be enough.

8. The tile whose lack one feels when playing **1853** is this one – the shallow curve, single small station. Its omission is due to a deliberate decision taken when Francis was designing **1829**. He didn't want natural track development to result in towns which began the game as wayside halts ending it as major towns (brown or grey stations). Not supplying this tile achieves this. **1853**, which is an earlier concept than **1830**, inherited the restriction. We agree with the omission in **1829** but don't see the need for it in **1853**, where the rule for calculating the length of routes means that one normally wishes to leave small stations as they are, thus avoiding the situation Francis wished to forestall.

The most obvious place where the tile is needed is on the exit hex for company 2 from Bombay. Victorian railway engineers were cost conscious men. Having gone to the unavoidable expense of building over one mountain, they wouldn't take careful aim for another when there was a perfectly good flat piece of ground available. Worrying about being cut off at the pass is the right period but the wrong set of Indians. It as not even as though game balance demands that life should be made more difficult for company 2; it already has more terrain costs to meet than its obvious rivals. So we have braved Francis's disapproval and put the tile in. You will need to make them yourself.

9. **1853** has a quiet stock exchange. So player interest demands that everybody should have the option of running a company from the start. In the existing four-player game this is unlikely to happen, and in the six-player game it is impossible; hence this change. Purists should note that Francis does not approve and that in the second edition of the rule book there is an optional rule which raises the 'number of shares needed to float' level throughout. Decide how your group likes to play the game; there is nothing to stop you accepting our other suggestions while omitting this.

10. This is an attempt to spice up the later stages of the game by increasing the anxiety felt by directors as to their rival's intentions. It also has the beneficial effect of making the expensive 5- and 6-trains more attractive.

11. This was put in late in the day, and we have only play-tested it the once. It seemed to achieve what we wanted but should be regarded as still experimental. The first-named author has used a version of it in games of **1829** for some years, and so there, at least, it has proved itself.

The Companies

The **EIR** remains attractive despite the extra obstacles we have put in its

way and the boosts we have given to its rivals. The company has the potential to be one of the most profitable from the start of the game right through to the finish. However, if you are going to bid for it at the start, you will need to construct your bid carefully. GIP can block you out from Delhi for a very long time, and that means that after the obvious Calcutta and Patna commitments you are left scratching round for city number three. If GIP does not float at the start, or if it wishes to be friendly, your problem disappears; otherwise look for an alliance with either BNR or BAR and make either Nagpur or Dacca your third choice. (Remember that passengers can change trains and cross the city at large stations and that you don't have to build the track yourself to fulfil your contract.)

GIP has been improved vis-à-vis the EIR, because of the easing of the terrain problem round Bombay. However, we would not, ourselves, include Bombay in a bid for this company. You will get your money back faster if you stick to northern cities. Delhi is the obvious second, and for the third look to see which other companies look likely to be floated. If the NWR is one, hitch a lift and make Lahore your third city; if not, extend a hand to the BNR and nominate Nagpur.

Only in rare circumstances should you make life other than difficult for the EIR. Head for Delhi via Lucknow and Cawnpore, garrison Cawnpore, and when the time comes to promote it to a green station make it a *single* station. This is natural track development for you and blocks out your rival. If the EIR looks like trying a southern run to Delhi, build towards Nagpur and exploit the fact that in **1853** the green track tiles are more restricted than in **1829** and don't allow crossovers. The EIR will probably get to Delhi eventually, but you can force it to go via Nagpur. Of course, if he or she is prepared to allow you into Calcutta...

The **NWR** has not been much affected by our changes. The financial penalties on second track lays might hurt a little, but for the rest it can continue to go its own quiet way. It has no early terrain costs to meet and can recover its director's bond money quickly. It has good early growth potential but is likely to fall behind in the middle game when the major cities climb in value and it benefits only from Delhi. Its best chance in this second stage is to build a narrow gauge network though the mountains and use the government subsidies to finance long-term growth. This should mean that the company can pay out virtually every time and so gain in capital growth what it is likely to be losing in dividends.

The **BNR** has a lot of building to do before it can connect three cities with its own track. This puts many people off bidding for it, as experience has shown that a fast return of one's bond money is important. However, there is no doubt that this is one of the companies likely to be paying big dividends from the middle game onwards. Control of Nagpur means that you have a good chance of being able to set up Calcutta–Bombay and Delhi–Madras runs, and there is no surer way than that of making the shareholders purr. To overcome the initial problem look for an ally with whom to cooperate over the initial bid. The EIR, GIP and BAR are all possibles, with the first of these being the best. An alliance with the EIR and a bid of Nagpur–Calcutta–Patna can result in the return of your bond money at the end of the third operating round.

The **BBCI** is the company most affected by the changes we have made and is now a very attractive early company, especially if it is floated as a major. You do, however, need to be careful both in the construction of your bid and in the management of your cash flow. There are a lot of early expenses, and it is easy, when nominating cities, to fall into the trap of adding one more than you can comfortably handle. Our recommendation is that you exclude Ahmadabad. A bid of Bombay–Ajmer–Jaipur can see you running two trains, paying good dividends and with your bond money returned by the end of operating round five.

The company's central position and guaranteed Bombay–Delhi run assure it of long-term profitability, and if you are lucky enough to find yourself without an early rival in the Delhi region, the company is likely to dominate the game for you.

The **MSM**, like all the minors, is another gainer from the changes. Your bid will clearly be Madras–Bangalore–Mysore, which will return your bond money at the end of operating round three. A good way to develop the company is then to keep building the metric line from Mysore until the green tiles come in. Then upgrade Bangalore using the 91 tile, put a new company base there and build standard gauge track to Hyderabad. This should enable you to link up with the northern companies and to take advantage of the lines that they will have already built.

With the **SIR** you can try something similar, but based on a bid of Madras–Trichonopoly–Mysore. It will take an extra operating round for the return of your bond money, and you won't be quite as well placed for the development northwards, but as compensation you have that easily built and very profitable metric line joining up all those small towns in the south.

The **BAR** is many people's favourite of the minors. You are close to Calcutta, you can play the NWR game of picking up government subsidies for building round the mountains, and you have a good chance of being able to break in to the Ganges valley routes that will have been built by the EIR. Run well this company can be very profitable.

The boost that we have given to the minors makes them competitive as candidates for the company on which to base your bid, and the fact that some of the playtests have resulted in wins for players who have gone for minors at the start and others in wins for players who have gone for majors encourages us to think that we have got the major–minor balance about right. Nonetheless, life is still not easy for the minors in phase one, as the restriction to one prematurely bought M-train slows their growth and limits their dividends. To overcome this it is in their interests to have a fast progression to phase two, something you are not going to get if the early companies are mainly minors.

We have tried our amendments out on several different groups of players and the reaction has been favourable. So, if you are one of the people who found the game as published a bit of a disappointment, give them a try. We have already made several converts; you could be another. We think that they make the game a serious rival for both **1829** and **1830**. Finally, a word of thanks for the groups in Aberdeen and North London, at Castlecon and Baycon, who helped with the playtesting. Without their ideas and criticisms the package would not have been half as good. SP

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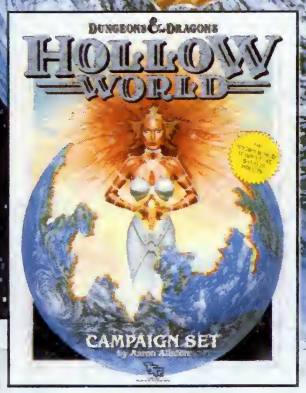

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